

7-1-2016

# A Phenomenological Study Of The Experiences Of Senior Enlisted Academy Graduates

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF SENIOR ENLISTED  
ACADEMY GRADUATES

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty

of the College of Graduate of Professional Studies at the University of New England

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the degree of Doctor of Education

Portland & Biddeford, Maine

July, 2016

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) graduates describe their experience of applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace. The researcher identified that the formulation of an effective senior enlisted leader's development is a relationship between what is learned at the SEA and the unique professional and personal experiences of each student.

Using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach, the researcher drew data from interviews with senior enlisted graduates from the SEA. As the researcher focused on the participants' experiences and views about applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace, the analyzed data suggested that their contributions to the learning environment were not motivated by academic rewards; instead, they felt personally supported by their peers and comfortable with sharing their individuality.

By listening to the graduates' perspectives, a high emphasis was placed on building a community through peer networking and applying what was useful in the workplace. However, the peer feedback method of assessment and learning was not evaluated; therefore, its importance was not attributed to the SEA's learning outcome. The participants noted that they were able to connect their prior knowledge and perspectives, and to incorporate other shared experiences, to support the learning progress. Nevertheless, the participants found that their true academic achievement connected to life after the SEA. The participants also pointed out that, as

part of their transition back into the workplace, making professional connections contributed to helping with workplace issues.

University of New England

Doctor of Education  
Educational Leadership

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincere appreciation to my advisors, Dr. Carol Holmquist, Dr. Michelle Collay, and Dr. Jeffery Wooten. I have been incredibly fortunate to have advisors who provided me research autonomy and guidance throughout this dissertation journey. I am extremely grateful for their patience and support, and for holding me to high research standards. The rigor in which they validated each chapter resulted in teaching me how to properly research. Thank you.

I am also grateful to the former and current staff at the Senior Enlisted Academy for their support during my graduate study. A special thanks to Dr. George “Bud” Baker for his insightful comments, patience, and support throughout many periods of my research where he helped in focusing my ideas.

I rarely ever expressed my gratitude to all of you, and what you have done for me. To my friends, Gabe, Sterling, Jennifer, and Amy, you were there as an extended family, and as mentors who challenged, inspired, and disciplined me. Most importantly, none of this would have been possible without the love and patience of my family. Thank you Mom, Dad, Nick, Toni, and Lauryn for your overarching support during this challenging part of my life and career. You allowed me to mature, and develop as a father, son, and a responsible man. Thank you for always being there for me.

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## CHAPTER 1:

### INTRODUCTION

Adults who pursue a higher education probably expect to have a memorable learning experience—in addition to growing personally or professionally. Although each adult's expectation differs, the likely outcome of obtaining new knowledge or improved understanding is probable (Stipek, 2002). Preparation for personal achievement is essential, but does not define the outcome; for example, practice is not the sole indicator of improvement. Conversely, in exploring opportunities in the U.S. Navy, senior enlisted sailors who are transitioning from the role of a technical leader to a hybrid leadership role (i.e., technical and personnel management) require an understanding of their previous work experiences coupled with education, which is a necessary undertaking. Although clarity in exploring this topic is not guaranteed, the opportunity to uncover senior enlisted experiences in education is guaranteed.

In this study, the researcher emphasized the senior enlisted sailor population that serves on active duty. The enlisted members of the U.S. Navy are at the E1–E9 levels. The “E” indicates that these members are enlisted. Generally, enlisted sailors enter the military with a high school diploma or little college education. While in the U.S. Navy, the role of the enlisted sailor is more technical; he or she is considered the doer. As these members are promoted to a higher rank in the U.S. Navy, their roles will shift from technical to managerial; however, they will yet hold certain technical, leadership obligations because they are enlisted. This promotion adds to the complexity of being enlisted. The increased responsibilities associated with being in a higher rank forces sailors to transition into leadership positions, yet simultaneously maintain a level of technical acumen (Baker, 2015).

Developing senior enlisted leaders (SELs) is an interesting responsibility. These sailors have been previously equipped with professional experiences that individually span (on average) more than a decade. Their experiences are critical for their personal and professional development to add or refine those skills. In 1981, the U.S. Navy established the Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) as the premiere learning institution for educating sailors in Ranks E7 through E9, making it the U.S. Navy's only professional military education institute for senior enlisted service members (U.S. Naval War College [U.S. NWC], 2016). In this study, the researcher has focused only on those who attended the SEA. These SEL sailors have served across a variety of assignments, and have had many roles and responsibilities. This diversity in job assignments and responsibilities has created a learning environment that mirrors a traditional higher educational setting.

The SEA is located in Newport, Rhode Island, and the sailors travel from around the world to attend. Attendance in this academy is open to the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corp, U.S. Air Force, U.S. Army, and U.S. Coast Guard. At the SEA, students attend classes to learn anew or cultivate known ideas of active communication skills, leadership styles and theories, organizational behavior, professionalism, and more (U.S. NWC, 2016). The curriculum is offered into two parts, both using the hybrid delivery method. The first part consists of a 9-week distance-learning model, followed by a 3-week resident course; the second part is a 6-week distance-learning model, followed by 2-week resident course (U.S. NWC, 2016). As a prerequisite, both formats require completion of the U.S. Navy's Primary Professional Military Education distance-learning course that consists of approximately 70 hours of online, self-study coursework.

The course promotes personal and professional development. Attending the SEA, as part of a career progressive step, should result in the sailors becoming more effective, nontechnical leaders. One of the many unwritten responsibilities of a U.S. Navy sailor is to develop other sailors; this role is significant for the longevity of service. The *Navy Leader Development Strategy (NLDS)*; U.S. NWC, 2013) ascribes, in general terms, the strategic importance of leader development as a shared responsibility of all sailors. In conjunction with the *NLDS*, the U.S. Navy Personnel Command (NPC), located in Millington, Tennessee, boasts that the “Mission first, Sailors always” motto, that stresses the idea that sailors are the U.S. Navy’s top priority, which was also echoed in the *NLDS*.

The SEA’s hierarchy is comprised of a director, deputy director, course director, and instructors. The main responsibility of the director is to provide the vision of the SEA, with advisement from the master chief petty officer of the U.S. Navy to the staff. The other roles within the SEA, such as the deputy and course director are to advise the director on student and curriculum matters, respectively. In addition, they provide course curriculum oversight and guidance to the instructors. The instructor’s responsibilities rest with facilitating the curriculum, and providing *feedback* to the deputy and course directors who deliver the information to the director.

The context of this study rested with SELs in the role of adult learners, and in the role that the SEA plays in their development. Contributing to adult learning, an exploration of the student’s experiences through their attendance at the SEA and the way that they apply the material in real-world situations provided clarity on the needs of adult learners. Next, the primary problem is addressed to provide a rationale or need for this study.

### Statement of Problem

In an ever-changing environment, it is most beneficial for organizations to identify areas of concern and to make changes that target improving performance (Mohrman & Lawler, 2012). O'Connor and Cordova (2010) found that, when students have an increased positive response towards job engagement, juxtaposition was observed between what was being studied and what seemed useful in the workplace.

Again, the U.S. Navy's enlisted sailors are technical experts. Typically, they are able to be promoted through the ranks without a college education, which is not a requirement or a prerequisite for promotion. This educational openness means that obtaining a college degree can be avoided and formal education can be replaced with specific occupational qualifications. Thus, learning happens mostly on the job, and the knowledge and experiences that are obtained are passed down through training. In addition, technical manuals serve as guides that emphasize how to do and how to accomplish specific tasks. Little room remains for conceptual innovation; therefore, the technically focused tasks most often require a lower degree of abstract thinking.

According to the U.S. Navy in the *NDLS* (U.S. NWC, 2013), a priority for U.S. Navy leaders is to focus on personal and professional development. The *NDLS* addressed obtaining professional experience from periodic training and education, which might result in better-developed sailors who are simultaneously tasked with leading other sailors (U.S. NWC, 2016). For the student, the SEA is a tool available to help accomplish priorities set forth in the *NDLS*. However, the above-mentioned development strategy does not include a need for the student to learn how to apply the SEA's curriculum in the workplace. Consequently, what benefit is an education if it cannot be used or is not used?

Reviewing the *NDLS* was significant; the SEA's learning objectives should align with the published strategy's expected outcomes. In the *NDLS*, the U.S. NWC (2016) describes outcomes as being "rooted in foundational Navy documents, such as, the oath of office/enlistment, Navy regulations, Navy core values, the Navy ethos, the charge of command, the sailors creed, and the chief petty officer creed" (p. 4). These U.S. Navy documents are available to all sailors via printed and electronic means. Although access to these documents might be useful for all sailors, use of them is limited in the SEA's curriculum. The content of each document surrounds primarily character traits; no published reasons exist to explain why the *NDLS* outcomes were not used completely in the curriculum. Nevertheless, the U.S. NWC did not include in the curriculum what the SELs needed to prepare them best to lead their subordinates in the workplace. Not understanding the course's relevance could contribute to a student's feeling of dissention (O'Connor & Cordova, 2010). This vagueness of transitioning from the SEL's technical responsibility to his or her nontechnical leading role requires a form of development that is more conceptual. To assume this role, the learning opportunities for adult learners must go beyond the training model. Students who attend the SEA are confident in how to do their technical work, and they will acquire requisite knowledge on how to think in conceptual terms, but learning to use this knowledge in the workplace is yet lacking.

While researching adult learning, the researcher discovered a few qualitative studies that discussed the experiences of students who attended instructor-led courses in which peer-interaction was associated with learning how to use the knowledge in the workplace. According to Knowles (1990) and Vella (2001), adult learners must know why they are learning a topic before they dedicate time to the lesson, and they must be actively engaged in the learning process. Furthermore, the expectation of learning how to use the SEA curriculum could lead to



an increase in understanding, and could provide a sense of accountability for the student as real situations arise (Vella, 2001).

Another important factor in adult learning is experience. Knowles (1990) contributed the idea that adult learners rely on their experiences; this idea supplements the notion that “knowledge is co-constructed in a social environment and that in the process of social interaction; people use language as a tool to construct meaning” (Churcher, Downs, & Tewksbury, 2014, p. 35). How a person experiences his or her reality includes how the experience was interpreted; therefore, the meaning of his or her experiences is subjective (Merriam, 2009). The activity of learning through participation to construct meaningful knowledge, while being instructor led, is a distinctive feature of the constructivist view (Merrill, 1991).

Vygotsky (1978) referred to constructivism as a concept in which learners actively process information in a meaningful manner (which is subjective) and then develop what is discovered as new information. Intertwining this new information within the learner’s community of practice creates a meaningful connection between prior, current, and new knowledge that is possible because of the interaction with others. Constructivists propose that learners are unique and multidimensional; each person’s background and culture forms his or her truth and reality, and affects how he or she attains new knowledge (Merriam, 2009).

Lave (1991) shared that learning through collaboration, interaction, and engagement via communities of practice could increase one’s performance. Moreover, when students are exposed to open dialogue, peer interaction could prove essential for performance development that improves learning (Liu & Carless, 2006). Without a detailed understanding of the SEA

course curriculum's intent, students might graduate, yet be ill prepared to meet the U.S. Navy's expectations as outlined in the *NDLS*.

Not practicing how to use the coursework creates an unreasonable expectation that leaves students without a clear applicable direction. Gravett (2006) conducted a study, illustrating that "students react to teaching practice and not teaching intent" (p. 263). It is the SEA's responsibility to prepare its students by facilitating the course curriculum so that the students can apply what they have learned. Instructors might do this by promoting student involvement and learning activities. However, without understanding the students' true experiences, the SEA can only provide useful education according to the organizations' known student needs.

The differences between the younger enlisted and senior enlisted personnel are their roles and responsibilities, hence, there are differing needs for training and education. The importance of learning how to do, which is training centric, is critical for younger enlisted sailor development (Baker, 2015). For senior enlisted sailors, the consequence of not understanding how to use what is learned voids the practical application notion of education provided at the SEA. They need a clear understanding of how to use new learning, that can be provided by a clear assessment in which feedback is provided and subsequently implemented. The student is thus able to use the feedback for performance improvement.

This problem is in line with Merriam's (2009) summarizing statement, "What do I want to know in this study?" (p. 58), with Creswell (2013) adding the importance of a "rationale or need for the studying a particular issue" (p. 130). Thus, Merriam (2009) defined the purpose as the "major objective or road map to the study" (p. 134). When teamed with the problem statement, this combination serves as a navigator, which will guide the purpose of the study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Each student who attended the SEA did not have equal formal higher education. The range in the student's formal education varied from a General Educational Diploma (GED) through postgraduate programs (Baker, 2015). Additionally, students had differing life and work experiences. Therefore, each student experienced the SEA in a different way.

Interactions between instructor and student and from student to student during the adult learning process allow them to contribute to each other's experience. The learning experience takes into account the direction in which adult learners must navigate to discover their motivation and ability to learn. Students enter this journey with a goal in mind, and for senior enlisted sailors, they also come with their leadership experience in tow (Russell, 2006). All students' goals include learning new information, or refining the information they currently have. An older paradigm assumes that information is power, and authority is hierarchical. This outlook is considered antiquated, however, and a more progressive way to approach this leadership development is to consider usable information with which instructors and students can create change and shift toward the fundamental contrasts of training and education (Wheatley, 1993).

The training and education dichotomy is essential for the U.S. Navy's learning culture. Although broad, both are a necessity to the SEA and U.S. Navy. Each approach is used for enlisted sailors at different times in their careers, but they can also be used simultaneously. The segment of the SEA graduate population that the researcher studied also represented a segment of adult learners, who were also senior enlisted sailors being taught by their peers. The role of the SEA instructors is to facilitate creating a foundational understanding of lessons taught within the classroom. A significant responsibility of the instructors is to provide student academic

support, in addition to other intangible support and resources that they might need during their SEA experience.

The experience of those attending the SEA highlights the transition from doing to using what they have experienced throughout their coursework. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how SEA graduates would describe their experience of applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace. To study this phenomenon, research questions were developed to support the research focus.

### **Research Questions**

Kouzes and Posner (2007) articulated, “Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue” (p. 518), by which they posited key communication principles of how leaders can and should interact. Kouzes and Posner also expressed the importance of having a vision, but one must have more than a vision when attempting to enlist others in believing and subsequently acting upon that vision. According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), the three essential practices by which leaders can execute a vision are to “listen deeply to others; discover and appeal to a common purpose; and give life to a vision by communicating expressively, so that people can see themselves in it” (p. 519). These three practices are fundamental in shaping the adult learner’s desire to achieve his or her individual goals.

In adult learning, adding to the narrative of essential practices and listening deeply to others allows the student the opportunity to be heard. This ability to be heard contributes to the dialogue that is necessary to gain an understanding of the learner’s experiences. Considering that the U.S. Navy benefits from the way that sailors disseminate information, experiential learning is at the core of its learning model. This learning model aligns with listening to ideas, opinions, and decisions to best facilitate learning. Next, discovering and appealing to a common purpose shows

what the U.S. NWC expected in the *NDLS* from enlisted leaders, and what the SEA anticipates that its graduates will have when they return to their workplaces: the knowledge that they have gained to serve others better. Those students who are in leadership positions will help guide or structure expectations that are informally facilitated. Finally, to give life to a vision by communicating expressively so that others are included should be an active occurrence in the workplace, which, if done correctly, can lead to goal achievement. Placing emphasis on the leader's perception and encouraging learning creates a culture of learning. The difficulty rests in having the clarity of direction, and in knowing how to use the new or refined information to arrive there. The advantage is that the new information allows learners to be included and to arrive at their own conclusions.

Using personal experiences in formal education is welcome because it complements the instructor's ability to contribute to the students' learning outcomes. Mezirow's (1981) transformative learning theory affirmed the method of challenging students' viewpoints, assumptions, and beliefs to understand what they experienced and to lead them to positive change. By gathering a student's descriptive experiences, an instructor can understand what it is like to be a student and to reintegrate into the workplace, so that the instructor can facilitate the student's personal and professional improvement. According to Landis and Landis (2013) to acquire this information, the instructor must consider and preserve the idea that "each individual learns differently and will perceive the world in a different manner" (p. 30). Specifically, the following questions provided clarity to the study:

1. How did SEA graduates describe using their personal and organizational experiences in the professional learning environment?

2. What is the meaning of the SEA graduate's experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?

These questions informed the researcher in the course of the study by allowing the researcher to explore adult learning thoroughly. The goals were (a) to gather the lived experiences of SEA students, (b) to reach towards their meaning, and (c) to provide plausible insights about the phenomenon that was studied. To explain this, the Conceptual Framework section provides an overview of the conceptual lens that the researcher used to guide the information collected.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In guiding this research towards understanding the meaning of the SEA graduates' experiences of learning how to use the coursework, the researcher used four approaches. This framework extends beyond identifying a student's perception of the information received and putting it to use. The conceptual framework of this study followed theoretical approaches that focus on exploring how SEA graduates describe their experiences of applying the coursework for use in their workplace.

In this study, the researcher connects the major characteristics of inquiry and provides a rational and methodical association to answer best the research questions. For the purpose of this study, the experiences of SEA students during the learning process were sought within the context of constructing this framework by combining (a) how adults learn, (b) the use of a community while learning, (c) the practice of feedback, and (d) the result of using the combined information in the workplace.

## **Adult Learning**

Balancing the responsibilities of daily life, while attempting to pursue higher education, can be a stressful task. The current workplace requires adults to learn continuously to meet the growing need for talent and expertise. Adult learners will have to seek opportunities to increase creatively their formal education by navigating through a variety of obstacles. These learners are motivated to seek higher education, particularly when faced with life changes, which might challenge them to improve personally or professionally. These are significant traits of adult learners. Expectations of leadership actions are another dimension of learning experiences for SELs.

Knowles (1968) explained that the characteristics of adult learners are noticeably different from child learners. Drawing upon andragogy theory, Knowles expounded on those assumptions and discussed the value of learning as a process. Andragogy serves as an umbrella for this study design. Within the study of andragogy, Knowles assumed that adult learners each possess (a) self-concept, (b) previous learning experience, (c) the readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) motivation to learn.

In addition, six assumptions were set within the theory of andragogy: (a) the reasoning or the why behind learning the topic, (b) adults are self-directed learners, (c) adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the educational setting, (d) adults enter educational settings ready to learn, (e) adults are problem-centered in their learning, and (f) adults are best motivated by internal factors (Knowles, 1990). These assumptions contrast with that of pedagogy, in which learners are dependent students who bring little or no experience to the educational setting and are present because they are mandated to be there and not because they alone have a personal desire to be present.

Knowles (1984) envisioned adult learning as a lifelong journey such that, once the learner is taught the lesson and has a supportive environment, over time, learning becomes recognized as a dynamic and interactive experience. Therefore, Knowles defined andragogy as both an art and a science of facilitating adult learning. Complementing on Knowles' andragogy with transformative learning, Mezirow (1991) examined learning as understanding a person's frame of reference that leads to freeing biases to gain greater knowledge. The common themes of this theory are experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. Making meaning of the student's experience is a defining characteristic of how adults integrate their self-concept, personality, emotional patterns, and learning styles to transform learning (Mezirow, 1991). When these aspects of meaning making are blended with andragogy, an understanding of learning and the student's motivation and readiness to learn are better constructed (Mezirow, 2000).

Both Knowles (1984) and Mezirow (2009) valued using the community to enhance learning. Therefore, adult learning places an emphasis on learning as a process rather than on the subject being taught. Adults require approaches from their teachers. The techniques used to facilitate must be as diverse as the experiences, skills, talents, and knowledge that the students bring to the classroom. These exceptional resources to the learning environment are invaluable and cannot be ignored. The SEA's curriculum can guide the students' understanding, but peer-interaction via the community of SEA students and graduates can achieve the curriculum goals of challenging their assumptions and identifying what they need to know.

### **Communities of Practice**

Improving performance within an organization can be achieved through acknowledging a need for and empowering the formation of communities of practice. These communities are people who engage in collective learning by sharing information of common interest through



various venues (Wenger, 1998). To form this concept, three characteristics must exist: domain, community, and practice (Wenger, 1998). To expound on this idea, the domain is the shared interest of the group, including individual's competency on the subject, whereas, in the community, relationships exist that enable people to learn from one another. Much of what adults learn and how they learn it is dependent on and is inseparable from group interactions and relationships. In this forum, discussions occur that are, hence, continued information sharing. The last characteristic, practice, is the resources used to address the concern or problem. Communities of practices could exist in several environments, depending on the overall goal. In the study of the SEA graduates, the community identified will be those who are seeking a collective group experience and who wish to collaborate to put into practice what they have learned.

In a collaborative learning environment, students learn from each other and from their teachers. The environment is filled with interaction and activities that play a noteworthy part in collaboration. This collaboration includes a transmission of information to the learner and supports their understanding how to use the information through interactions with those involved in the learning process. Regarding social development, Vygotsky (1987) posited that language aids in the formulation of knowledge. Furthermore, Vygotsky argued that the progression from actual to potential development occurs with guidance from expert counsel. This progression is called the zone of proximal development (ZPD), where a separation occurs between the learning and the cognitive developmental processes. Vygotsky (1978) argued that the developmental process does not happen simultaneously with learning processes, but precedes it. Therefore, collaboration is necessary for students to achieve a higher cognition. This was an important

component to Vygotsky's theory, who viewed collaboration as the connection that supports the *transfer* of knowledge, and ZPD as its motivating factor.

Another viewpoint of learning theory is that of the situative–sociohistoric viewpoint, whose proponents explained that the people are inseparable from their communities and environments. Under this view, knowledge is distributive as social, material, and cultural artifacts of the environment, and that learning occurs and is motivated by the developing of identities within the communities in which they reside or participate. Learning opportunities should encourage participation within the inquiry, with the supportive researcher, and should help discipline the student's practices. An example of this would be using analogies. Within groups, if a person can supplement their learning by using another person to convey familiarity with important aspects of the topic, this engagement will bring learning into concert with the teacher's goals (Gardner, 1999). Concisely, learning should be grounded in problems that are meaningful to the student (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). With the cognitive approach, the instructor seeks to understand and describe the working of the mind. Knowledge includes reflection, conceptual growth and understanding, problem solving, and reasoning. Using previous workplace and learning experiences contributes to knowledge that includes the active reconstruction needed to build new knowledge. Thus, many individuals learn more effectively in a group setting; therefore, the community engagement within groups is said to occur naturally, and the motivation to maintain the engagement is essential, which then leads to using feedback (Gardner, 1999).

### **Feedback**

While in attendance at the SEA, students are assigned readings, are engaged in instructor–student dialogue, and are asked to solve problems in case studies. The students do not

practice applying active communication skills, leadership styles and theories, organizational behavior, and professionalism through instructor-led course. The course curriculum does not identify how to use the information, which could lead to ambiguous expectancies of what and how SEA graduates should apply it in their workplace. Again, students are expected to graduate from the SEA prepared to apply the techniques and skills that they learned from the coursework to lead sailors effectively without interactive instructor-led development; however, this information might only be discussed and gained within their peer group.

As an essential part of personal and professional development, peer interaction is often associated with performance, which includes feedback provided by peers. The motive behind feedback stems from the lifelong learning concept, which is achieved through quantitative and qualitative forms of feedback. Feedback is most effective when it is delivered with specifics by narrative and verbal means. When it is not specific, it is less effective and does not provide learners with the assessment required for improved performance. van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema (2010) examined peer feedback as a tool for learning intervention. This feedback is also described as a social process tool because team learning is collaborative.

Lave's (1991) theory supported the use of a group of students engaging in the same assignment, working together as a team, and sharing feedback for performance improvement. Currently, the conventions of adult learning as transformative learning through a constructivist view was presented as a brief description of knowledge, learning, and the utility of feedback. The points presented could aid the learner in transforming understanding by receiving and applying feedback, and by increasing performance effectiveness in the workplace.

## **Taking Learned Knowledge into the Workplace**

The task of taking what is studied in the classroom into the workplace is multifaceted, and the transfer of knowledge is an integral part of the learning process (Dinsmore, Baggetta, Doyle, & Loughlin, 2014). Therefore, one of the goals of learning is to use effectively skills and knowledge that are gained from the classroom. Successful students can use practice to expand and develop critical thinking skills without sacrificing experiential knowledge or the course's content.

The SEA has the ability to leverage senior enlisted students who are returning to the workplace with refined or new knowledge in organizing a network that will provide a sense of community. As adult learners, they have the ability to transfer learning, but it might be influenced by their ability to notice, recognize, and create meaning out of the perceived problem and connect it to the academic course. Depending on the student's previous experience, the progress for them toward understanding and applying the education gained is equally important.

### **Assumptions, Limitations, Scope**

The views of assumptions, limitations, and scope are interpreted from the researcher's lens, which begins with how the U.S. Navy recognizes the importance of its sailors, which is stated in the U.S. NPC's motto: "Mission first, sailors always." Further, Bolman and Deal (2013) were in line with the NPC's motto when they stated, "Leadership understands that both the organization and people need each other respectively" (p. 135). Thus, the organization needs its people to operate because it is imperative that training and education dichotomy is understood. In this regard, training is arguably different from education; however, the U.S. Navy invests millions in training its enlisted service members on technical and physical tasks, but less on

professionally educating them. This might work for the apprentice; however, for sailors who must transform into U.S. Navy leaders, the disconnection is problematic.

The most difficult step in problem solving is to identify the problem and to communicate assumptions (Schein, 2006). Forecasting the need and the necessary action for professional development education to the U.S. Navy's senior enlisted ranks was necessary. Leaders who do not practice what they preach experience the consequences: behaviors that are advocated, but not practiced will gradually transition from seemingly normal to disabling, and can shift one suddenly into a crisis (Wheatley, 2006).

In this study, the researcher was concerned with three primary assumptions. First, the instructor at the SEA had a firm understanding of how to engage students in giving feedback. The researcher assumed that the position of instructor came with implicit knowledge of how to provide feedback that would appeal to the students for their development. The researcher also assumed that the students who had chosen to attend the SEA were readily available for enrollment. Presumably, each sailor with Internet access would be available to begin the distance-learning portion, and those who would attend and complete the distance-learning portion would be available to attend the resident session. Lastly, the researcher assumed that the learning environment the SEA students used would be uninterrupted. The population of students might reach more than 100. Included in this population would be a variety of personality types, educational backgrounds, and work and life experiences.

The limitations of this study were the students' perceptions of the SEA and the lessons that the course would provide to them. First, the accessible student population of this study was roughly less than 1% of senior enlisted sailors. Within this population, the researcher assumed that those who would attend the SEA would have an understanding of the knowledge they that

they would receive while in attendance. This view stemmed from the population of graduates who were in the workplace; this information about course expectations added the variable of a preconceived notion about the SEA.

Another limitation was that the SEA is a mandatory course for future promotion opportunities; therefore, the course might have been viewed as watered-down because of the requirement. This interpretation could have affected the usefulness of the course. Third, through word-of-mouth, students look to peer-interaction to satisfy their learning. It is understandable that “no two people see the world exactly the same” (Wheatley, 2006, p. 149); therefore, learning should not be treated as a one-size-fits-all process.

Additionally, other limitations were either not addressed or lacked research depth, but they all seem to play a role in affecting human behavior in any environment. The first limitation was emotions and anxiety from the student. How people feel is important when they listen to or read about their assessed performance. Second, although mentioned in other studies, the environment yet seemed underexplored. Not all participants were comfortable in the same setting. Lastly, generational differences regarding feedback receptivity, the assessor expertise, and student’s interpretation of what was fed back were loosely addressed in the research.

Other limitations included internal barriers within the U.S. Navy and the SEA. The limitations of the researcher’s study also included Bloom’s (1956, as cited in Forehand, 2005) taxonomy, which is arranged in hierarchal stages from a less complex to a more complex learning involvement. Bloom identified six levels of cognition: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Knowledge and comprehension are passively received from the instructor, whereas application is the bridge through which practice is necessary before moving to a higher expectation of creating new knowledge. The two initial

stages are identified in the SEA's learning objectives, but application is not mentioned, which is problematic if students are expected to convey their learned knowledge into the workplace.

Understanding the SEA intended outcomes is not sufficient; the learner must feel prepared and empowered to apply the knowledge in the workplace, and to be able to confidently communicate and apply the coursework after graduation (Grace, Korach, Riordan, & Storm, 2006). Bolman and Deal (2006) mentioned two common problems: (a) leaders often "fail to invest time and resources necessary to develop a cadre of committed, talented employees" (p. 133), and (b) the resources provided for development are not sufficient. This makes the scope of the researcher's study diverse. In the study, the researcher included students who were SEA graduates from differing locations. The ages of these participants were not the primary factor, rather, their years of naval service and time in their current position are more relevant, and will be addressed later in study.

### **Significance**

In this study, the researcher addressed the significance behind needing more information concerning how to educate senior enlisted sailors who have extensive military experience and are adult learners. Traditionally, senior enlisted sailors have learned from their experiences. In creating an optimal learning experience, while attempting to maintain continuous professional development to improve their leadership abilities, discovering the meaning of their SEA and workplace experience is essential.

Balancing what is learned in the classroom and what is experienced in practice is equally beneficial to the student. Aristotle once said, "For the things we have learned before we can do them, we learn by doing them" (Bynum & Porter, 2005). The apprenticeship model of training is the beginning of experiential learning for newly enlisted sailors. As these sailors advance in their

careers, the researcher could assume that their needs would change. Kolb (1984) believed that, once the experience is grasped, it could be added to other experiences—whether they were gained reflexively or through active participation—and transformed into learning. Although oversights are inevitable, without training, the risk of making costly mistakes could harm the organization's overall effectiveness (Bolman & Deal, 2013).

Additionally, the strengths and weaknesses of feedback are said to help build knowledge and skills, which would result in improvements in the quality of learning and performance (van Ginnip et al., 2010; Govaerts, van de Weil, & van der Vleuten, 2012; Topping, 2009). Thus, researchers have argued that the students who have been assessed perceived feedback from expert assessors as valuable, and were equally receptive to their peers and to non-expert assessors. These trends led the researcher to seek further research. The results of this study supported the understanding of adult learners' experiences as qualitatively and directly related to workplace performance, and as understudied. When written feedback is combined with verbal feedback, the relationship gains strength (Govaerts et al., 2013), but the feedback must be specific and free of ambiguity. Lastly, an emphasis on interpersonal skills should be included in continued studies. This variable might aid as a determining factor for verbal feedback.

Although the researcher restricted this study to the experiences of one small group of senior sailors who graduated from the SEA, understanding their confidence and motivation to learn could prepare them to resolve challenging and complex situations in the future. Providing an appreciative response to multiple perspectives would encourage learning in a more realistic manner. Asking students to think about how they experienced a phenomenon that is relevant and worthy of their time and attention would facilitate a construction of their own knowledge. With the present inquiry, the researcher extends the research by conducting qualitative study with a



focus on the participants' perspectives. The data collected and the results received were not generalized to the larger senior enlisted sailor population because the researcher intended this study to explain the experiences of the specific sample collected.

### **Definitions**

For purposes of this study, the following terms were used: adult learner, adult learning, andragogy, bracketing, epochè, enlisted, essence, feedback, higher education, learning, learning outcomes, instructor, SEL, semistructured interview, peer-feedback, and workplace.

**Adult learner.** This person is an individual who returns to enter formal education after completing a GED or a high school diploma.

**Adult learning.** This mode of education encompasses a number of theories that account for experiences and characteristics of the learning process.

**Andragogy.** The education and learning of adults, placing an emphasis on the learning process and not the subject being taught.

**Bracketing.** Paralleling epoché, bracketing allows the researcher to set aside assumptions and accept being open to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

**Epoché.** In using this process, a researcher attempts to set aside preconceived biases or presuppositions. Through honest self-reflection, and before interviewing the participants, the researcher describes the experience of the phenomenon under investigation, and later examines the data for biases, expectations, and preconceptions (Moustakas, 1994).

**Enlisted.** Enlisted service members join the military with, at minimum, a high school diploma. Their primary role is, initially, technical. Once they become more senior in rank, their responsibilities become managerial and, on occasion, they shed their technical expertise.

**Essence.** This concept describes the central meanings commonly understood through what was commonly experienced (Creswell, 2009). For this study, the lived experiences and meanings of participants were examined and compared to identify the common *essences* of the students' experiences.

**Feedback.** This educational technique is the reporting back of the information about the progress of a person or group in reaching a goal. It includes providing information to another party according to the perception of their performance and specifying, through evaluation, how to improve (Wiggins, 2012).

**Higher education.** This level of education is formal undergraduate or graduate education.

**Learning.** This educational concept is any process that leads to change (Illeris, 2007). Piaget (1976) posited that knowledge is formed from experiences and is established by social relationships. This is the process of acquiring knowledge and transforming it into understanding.

**Learning outcomes.** For the purpose of this study, Ascough (2011) defined outcomes as the measureable work that students demonstrate at the end of the prescribed coursework. These outcomes are related to the impact of the course on the student.

**Instructor.** This person is commonly in the position of faculty advisor. Instructors in this study are senior enlisted sailors serving in the ranks of E8 or E9.

**Senior enlisted leader.** SELs are sailors who serve in paygrades E7 through E9. For this study, the researcher will interchange the terms students, leaders, and SELs.

**Semistructured interviews.** This research tool is a method of interviewing in which the researcher uses a combination of prearranged and impromptu questions.

**Peer feedback.** This educational tool is provided to “equal status learners” in situations wherein students assess each other, sharing both one-way and reciprocated assessments (Topping, 2009).

**Workplace.** This place of endeavor is within the United States military, including ships, aircraft squadrons, submarines, various-sized land bases, field, jungle, and dessert sites, and construction sites.

### **Conclusion**

In studying adult learning, communities of practice, and feedback, the researcher has explored how SEA graduates describe their experiences of learning how to use SEA coursework in their workplace. Chapter 1 has included a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, a brief conceptual framework, the assumptions, the limitations, and scope, significance, and definitions. Specifically, the researcher focused Chapter 1 on senior enlisted sailors who bring their experiential knowledge into the classroom, transform it into a leadership role, and focus on how to use their new or refined knowledge.

In conclusion, ultimately, the rigorous process of inquiry ensued, resulting in findings that can guide instructors to include the significant learning experiences of SEA graduates into the course curriculum. In Chapter 2, the researcher presents a scholarly review and a critique of types of adult learning, and how to put the learning experience to practical use.

## CHAPTER 2:

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The review of this literature, the researcher has explored adult learning and its implications for understanding the process of assessment, feedback, and taking the knowledge to the workplace for use. A background of adult learning and the processes associated have been studied, along with reviewing a conceptual roadmap to understand the experiences of SEA graduates. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how SEA graduates describe their experiences of applying their learning in their workplace by unpacking adult learning, and exploring the adult learner's experience, feedback, and transferring learning to task.

In this chapter, the researcher connects the literature to variables related to the study; therefore, it is organized according to three main topics: adult learning, assessment and feedback, and taking the learning to task. Some underlying theories and concepts are addressed: andragogy specifically and then transformative learning, which led the adult learning discussion. Learning is the foundation for this study, but how the learners do the task and reflect on it is the impetus behind its importance.

#### **Learning and the Adult Learner**

The term learning is defined differently across academic disciplines (Ihejirika, 2012). Illeris (2007) suggested a constant notion that learning is a life-long process that results in change. Hence, Ihejirika (2012) described its result as a change in performance gained through “practice, training, or experience” (p. 53) in or out of learning institutions is a fair assumption. It is necessary to understand how the meaning of adult's experiences frames the narrative, which

contributes to learning. Thus, Ihejirika (2012) further stated, “Learning as a natural phenomenon is a psychological construct without which education would be difficult to come by” (p. 58).

According to Landis and Landis (2013), knowledge is meant to bring the learner closer to the truth. Getting closer to the truth might require a less traditional view of learning because each person learns differently and views the world through a different lens (Landis & Landis, 2013). Piaget (1976) posited that learning is formed from experiences, and is established by social relationships. Vygotsky (1987) partially agreed, but felt that learning also occurs through social exchanges, and is enhanced by personal experiences. For adults, their personal experiences contribute greatly to learning, while this differs from children, who lack that foundational (experiential) variable (Russell, 2006).

With the term andragogy, Knowles (1990) focused on the teaching of adults, and described the difference between andragogy and pedagogy, which focuses on children. The core of Knowles’ andragogy–adult learning theory is six assumptions the author studied regarding the adult learner. These assumptions did not cater to the child learner; therefore, a different set of opportunities exist in the adult learning setting. Although conceptually different, Knowles explained that the andragogy–adult learning model is not unconnected from, but builds upon pedagogy.

Knowles (1990) explained his adult learning theory assumptions in a comprehensive manner, starting with Assumption 1 that stated that adults hold a sense of curiosity of knowing why they need to learn the information prior to learning it. Similar to child-like curiosity, adults have a need to know the risk or reward of learning before they participate in the activity.

Assumption 2 was that adults are self-directed learners. The decisions surrounding education are personal to them; consequently, the responsibility for teachers to contribute to the students' learning experience makes it necessary to minimize learning dependency.

Therefore, Assumption 3 was the learner's experience. Knowles (1990) argued that adults have more and different experiences than child learners. This depth of individual experiences suggests that the adult learner has an advantage over the child when new information is introduced.

Assumption 4 was that adults have the willingness to learn. Summarizing Knowles (1990), as adults become ready to learn, they are more willing to gain knowledge that is necessary to meet their goals or desires. Assumption 5 was described as an alignment or an orientation to learning. For adult learners this orientation is specific to the action-orientated task that they meet in real-time. Their enthusiasm to gain new knowledge for problem solving is heightened because of the responsibility to complete the task. Knowles' Assumption 6 was motivation. The motivation that Knowles wrote about was internally posited such that personal diligence should be exercised to prevent negativity towards learning.

With the theory of andragogy, Knowles (1990) highlighted the accomplishments of adult learners that rest on the understanding their individual needs. With this idea, Knowles considered the learner's mode of thinking, personal experiences, personal expectations, and ability to construct and retain knowledge. The complexity of learning includes understanding internal and external variables that influence the process (Illeris, 2007). A common challenge is defensive reasoning, which blocks a person's ability to think, reason, or commit to change (Argyris, 2006). This reasoning can vary, whereas subjectivity and objectivity are necessary while assessing performance prior to delivering feedback directed at improving workplace performance.

Argyris (2006) stated, “Because many professionals are almost always successful at what they do, they rarely experience failure” (p. 268). Conditioned to believe that failure is never an option, the students who attend the SEA strive to do their best, and might miss learning to satisfy the organization’s expectations. Argyris specifically discussed internal organizational challenges in teaching adults by noting that the most successful person seldom fails and, when presented with what resembles failure, does not know how to work through it, and eventually might place blame on others.

### **Understanding Transformative Learning**

Each learner has a unique background, history, and experiences; therefore, one can think of learning as an organic and unidimensional occurrence. Each person possesses different strengths, weaknesses, interests, and ways of processing information among other qualities (Gardner, 1999). To identify the depths of each learner’s differences would be to assume that a simplification of categorizing and prioritizing existed in the learning process (Gardner, 1999). The knowledge, skills, and experiences of the learner might lead them through a learning process to the desired or expected outcome. To this end, as Mezirow (2009) noted, transformative learning takes the student from a “set of assumption and expectations—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change” (p. 92) as necessary. The importance of transformative learning is that it explains how using assumptions and presuppositions form expectations.

Fundamental to a student’s learning development, transformative learning involves the student gaining consciousness of his or her present understandings, perspectives, assumptions, and points of view then making a decision to integrate and revise them for a new, more informed, and justifiable understanding that guides improved actions (Gravett, 2006; Foote,

2015). At the core, Mezirow (2000) described “transformative” as a way of knowing, which is synonymous with a person’s frame of reference. This learning does not come easy; when people are deeply rooted in their beliefs, they are disinclined to change. Therefore, they can experience cognitive disequilibrium, which is the tension that a person feels when something does not fit with what he or she once knew to be true (Gravett, 2006.). They must be convinced that change is necessary, and that a revision of their existing rationale would be favorable for growth.

In this transformative study, Mezirow (1981) described learning as a five-step process. In Step 1, Mezirow (1981) stated, “Reflecting critically on the source, nature and consequences of relevant assumptions—our own and those of others” (p. 94) is where adults learn discernment. This step refers to how we know, and it is an important factor when describing a person’s frame of reference. Step 2 requires additional research from the learner; an instrumental part of learning is determining the accuracy of information. For example, consider if one were to sit through a lecture during which the speaker would purport that his or her information is seemingly true; the curiosity of an audience member might prompt him or her either to investigate further the information’s validity or to look for supplemental information to fill the gaps.

Mezirow (1981) categorized Step 3 as a part of communicative learning. In this case, the learner would not be alone on his or her journey. Discourse would be an essential part of this step; the learner would be fully immersed in continuing the search through multiple [individual] beliefs. The discovery of new information would lead to Step 4, taking action on a new perspective. The interpretation of information according to experience, beliefs, events, oneself, serves as contributing factors that forms a reality, and influences behaviors. According to Mezirow (1981), the evidence found reorients the learner to “acquiring a disposition” (p. 94) of reflecting upon what is believed. Learning in Step 5 provides a sense of attentiveness and critical



self-awareness regarding the meanings relationships regarding prior assumption (Mezirow, 1981).

A form of critical awareness is necessary; a deep and personal reflexive response is obligatory to act on making a change. Unfortunately, students cannot do this alone. An opportunity to discover ideas, which challenges their beliefs, will lay the foundation for instructors to guide change successfully in the student. This transformative experience for adult learners is a result of “shifts in emotions and perceptions from shock, fear, and intense grief” (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014, p. 28). This experience includes a revision or rearrangement of prior knowledge to increase the person’s abilities.

Arguably, transformative learning among SEA students might include all the aforementioned factors, in addition to daily life challenges. Collaboration among peers is also significant for transformative learning. According to Illeris (2009), perhaps a clearer concept to understand is that being transformative is “aimed at changes not only in what we know but changes in how we know” (p. 42). To summarize, unlike traditional learning, transformative learning allows the learner to see beyond his or her assumptions and mental habits, and to reframe his or her thinking through a reasonable assessment of his or her experiences, beliefs, and knowledge of self.

### **Exploring the Adult Learning Experience**

Research that is focused on learning is typically used to address the benefits and barriers to learning rather than the meaning of adult learning (Fok, 2010). Ascribing to adult learning theory in higher education contributes to educators having a richer understanding of what variables might affect learning. The learning experiences would then need to integrate approaches applicable in the workplace. Students want to make sense of what they are learning;

therefore, their individual interests, content relevance, and workplace involvement must be addressed.

According to Kegan (2009), “Every student comes with a ‘learning past’ that is an important part of his or her present and future learning” (p. 45). Students who are highly successful in their workplace are likely to continue to use what they have learned in their workplace. Additionally, a person’s self-efficacy contributes to the transfer of learning. In other studies, the need to know motivated students to accept new knowledge before they changed their perspectives, and motivated them to consider how they would perform in the workplace. This is contingent on the learning environments in which the teachers provide the students an opportunity to share their experiences in the classroom. Students who have this opportunity might have a stronger motive to learn. The importance of curriculum in student development is that the course content should be relevant. If learning is not used in the workplace, its lack of use is directly related to the lack of student understanding, and the workplace relationship to the course content.

Lastly, the job relevance is associated with learning questions about how to apply what is being learned. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) suggested that learning is the result of one’s personal ability, and being able to position oneself within the community. Therefore, the community comprises those participants who have graduated and have returned to the workplace.

Adult learners desire to excel; therefore, they enter the learning environment with a need to know approach that includes their previous experiences, a willingness to learn more, and a strong impetus towards learning. They are inclined to be more self-directed and task-oriented (Knowles, 1984). Their experiences as adult learners are affected by the length of time that they

have spent away from the academic environment. The time that the learner has spent outside this environment might dislodge him or her from an understanding of how to learn, which might be replaced with already ingrained learning strategies (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011).

Barriers to adult learners' success include a lack of self-determination, negative prior learning experiences, and limited drive or motivation, which is rooted in low self-efficacy (Foote, 2015). Additionally, the stress of learning in a newly formed community might distract the learner, leaving him or her indifferent or unwilling to pursue the education (Kenner & Weinerman, 2011). In their professional careers, adult learners might be highly successful, whereas, in a new and different environment, in which they do not have the requisite experience for immediate success, their psyches and self-perceptions might be a barrier to acquiring the necessary tools required for academic learning. Age is also a factor that affects adult learners; they might be older than other students are, might feel ashamed to be in school with younger learners, and learning might seem to be a waste of time because of their ages (Ihejirika, 2012).

### **Investigating Assessment and Feedback**

Assessing performance is not an easy task. No singular method is available to conduct a performance assessment; researchers note that multiple formats exist. The assessor might use one format or a combination of formats to satisfy the outcome. Both the assessor and those assessed might face angst during the process. The emotions associated with assessments provoke unknown behaviors between both parties that might injure the relationship. Therefore, Buhler (2005) reasoned that assessments are critical aspects of performance development. Student progression is a result of the effective use of assessment, especially when it targets and addresses their strengths and weaknesses.

Assessments can be used as a formal evaluation, can be provided additionally upon course completion, and can be used as a conclusion with a grade (Buhler, 2005). Assuming that the assessment is positive, negative, or both, the assessor must articulate factual information to the student concerning his or her performance. The assessment should include set criteria and objectives for the student to follow. Moreover, assessors must share an assessment vision, and must provide the necessary resources to allow students an opportunity to learn best and effectively. Conducting assessments in this fashion encourages learning to be a shared responsibility.

A collaborative assessment requires the assessor and the assessed to have an agreement that begins with measuring performance, which addresses Wilkins and Shin's (2010) reciprocal teaching. Professional development, collaboration, and reflection, are impactful to the overall concept of assessment. Traditionally, these examples are relegated to student-teacher relationships, but peer-to-peer assessments also exist. Within peer-to-peer assessments, systems are in place for standardization; it is how those systems are approached that is important.

Performance assessment conducted by peers, and the environment of their delivery is a strategic method of informing students of their performance. Caruth and Humphreys (2008) agreed that an assessment system is essential, and that it might be both administrative and motivational in nature. They cautioned instructors regarding the use of assessments because students exhibit behavior according to actions and reactions. Such behavior that is demonstrated by students is natural, and when feeling slighted, students have the right to appeal unfair assessments. These behaviors ignite emotions, and might to lead a discussion of the student's views of an assessment system that is disconnected from reality that is founded on perceived performance (Caruth & Humphreys, 2008; Gilbert, 2007).

As educators continue to explore learning, active participation from the student and teacher is necessary. To summarize, depending on the student, a variety of emotions during assessments could seem as an attack on their knowledge, skills, or abilities. Their perception might depend on a shared understanding of the assignment, or their attitude towards the assessor. The frame of responses during the assessment, mixed with the assessor's credibility, previous relationship, and education level can affect the students learning when combined with feedback such that a different result might be developed.

### **Feedback**

The origin of the term “feedback” dates from the 1800s; however, the qualitative definition of the term does not hold the same meaning as it did originally. As in other disciplines, the term was originally associated with a mechanical process of outputs and inputs, and referred to a chain of auditory events. As used today, researchers and scholars have formed the word “feedback” as a grammatical compounding of the words “feed” and “back.” This term now means to provide information “back” to another party, according to how the perceiver views the other person's performance, and it should include specifying through evaluation how the other person could improve. More specifically, in education, Van de Ridder's (2008, as cited in Govaerts et al., 2013) understanding of feedback was “specific information about the comparison between a trainee's observed performance and a standard given with the intent to improve the trainee's performance” (p. 106). Other scholars have defined feedback as past information about performance that is communicated to the learner in relation to a set standard (Nicol & Milligan, 2006), and evidence reported on progression efforts intended to meet or exceed a goal (Wiggins, 2012).

Wiggins (2012) explained feedback as remarks made to students after the assignment that resembled advice, praise, and evaluation; he continued to argue, “None of these are feedback, strictly speaking. Basically, feedback is information about how we are doing in our efforts to reach a goal” (p. 11). While working to achieve a goal, the feedback provided might be received as positive or negative; although “feedback is essential for goal pursuit” (Fishbach, Eyal, & Finkelstein, 2010), assumptions and variables must be addressed that affect relationships within an organization.

In continuing to define feedback, consideration should be given to the researcher’s viewpoint and study. Again, feedback is more than an evaluative conversation, for it must address the student’s goal, ability, and vision (Hattie, 2008). In addition, Cartney (2010) questioned whether the best method of delivery should be written or verbal. Cartney continued to investigate the balance between quantity and quality, but failed to debate other methods of feedback. Conversely, three assumptions are associated with the misuse of feedback. Assumption 1 is that positive feedback will yield positive results; Assumption 2 is that the delivery and receptivity of feedback will be perceived as fair; and Assumption 3 is that feedback is used only to correct deficiencies or mistakes (Wiggins, 2012; Wilkins & Shin, 2010).

### **What Constitutes Feedback**

Nicol and Milligan (2006) explored the quality of personnel assessment when using feedback. In their research, they compiled seven principles of feedback:

1. Helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, and expected standards).
2. Facilitates the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning.
3. Delivers high quality information to students about their learning.
4. Encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning.

5. Encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem.
6. Provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance.
7. Provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

Principle 1 is that having clarity of goals, criteria, and expected standards is important.

This principle means that one must understand the organic nature of feedback and recognize that, although the criteria are set, adjustments can be made. Nicol and Milligan (2006) stated, “Students can only regulate and self-correct their progress towards learning goals if they have a clear understanding of the goals and of the standards and criteria that define goal attainment” (p. 2).

The expected standards are similar to the course’s objectives, which lead one to Principle 2 of practicing reflection and self-assessment. Reflection is only half the equation, but to self-assess and discover personal deficiencies add a critical step toward continued personal improvement. An effective method by which to foster self-regulation in students is to offer opportunities to practice being flexible in their learning. Students can recognize critical connections between their learning goals and the results that they yield (Nicol & Milligan, 2006).

Principle 3 is to ensure that a high quality of information is transmitted concerning student learning. This principle is related to Principle 1. The quality of information that influences the student to improve his or her performance is significant. Therefore, the feedback received from teachers provides a basis for students who desire to assess their goals, criteria, and standards (Nicol & Milligan, 2006). Nicol and Milligan (2006) drove this point home concisely: “Good quality external feedback is information that helps students trouble-shoot their own performance and self-correct; that is it helps the students take action to reduce the discrepancy between their intentions and the resulting effects” (p. 5). Furthermore, an increase in students’

awareness of their strengths and weaknesses empowers them “to take steps to address deficiencies in their own learning” (Nicol & Milligan, 2006, p. 4).

In Principle 4, the teacher–peer dialogue serves as the communication vehicle to satisfy the dissemination of information. The desire to improve the value surrounding feedback and the probability that the information will be understood is to theorize feedback as more dialogue, rather than as an informative monologue.

Nicol and Milligan (2006) stated, “Motivation, self-esteem and self-regulation are inextricably linked” (p. 8). Therefore, Principle 5 is reflective of research that indicates that motivation for students is founded on their evaluation of the teaching, what they are learning, and the overall assessment conducted. Feedback can then have a constructive or destructive outcome on student motivation; it affects how students feel, which in turn affects their learning environment.

Principle 6 provides the opportunity to close the gap between current and desired performance, which is an essential step in follow-on improved performance. In the learning environment, students might have a slight chance to use the feedback received to facilitate closing the gap, then make improvements, specifically for the scheduled projects. Unfortunately, they are often forced to move on to the next task before or soon after they receive feedback (Nicol & Milligan, 2006).

Nicol and Milligan (2006) mentioned, “Good feedback practice is not only about providing good information to the students about learning but it is also about providing good information to teachers” (p. 10). Hence, Principle 7 was focused on information to teachers to help shape teaching. To construct effective feedback that is applicable and edifying, teachers require good information concerning student progression. In addition, they need to be intimately



involved in examining the data before taking action to assist other teachers and students minimize the learning gap.

### **Effectiveness of Feedback**

To make feedback effective, the assessor must employ active communication. Active listening specifically is important for any effective feedback session. Giving the provider full attention enables the speaker to focus on the delivery of the intended message. Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (2008) discussed organizational communication and performance feedback as downward communication, stating that feedback happens from the top down. However, the text does not provide any information concerning peer feedback or reciprocated feedback. Hersey et al. also insinuated that feedback is hierarchal and not bottom up or peer-provided.

The argument among researchers of feedback returned to clarifying the definition of feedback and its primary purpose. The consensus surrounding feedback is that it should be effective and that it is not synonymous to giving advice, evaluation, or grades. Wiggins (2012) interjected that all feedback need not be positive, but must be actionable, among other traits. Some teachers perceive themselves as knowing how to provide valuable feedback, but some students disagree. According to Hattie (2008), the level of feedback received is only as effective as the student's receptivity. Affecting receptivity are interpersonal variables of feedback, for van Gennip et al. (2010) described feedback as psychological with the factors of safety, trust, value, diversity, and interdependence that reflect the success or failure of implementing feedback. Refuting the assumption that consistency of feedback provides greater results, which Hattie (2008) debunked, the same feedback does not yield the same results; the onus is on the receiver to accept or reject the feedback.

## **The Feedback Model**

The feedback model resembles a round loop that begins with the execution of a task, then proceeds to the assessment, then to providing feedback, and then loops back to performance improvement. The motive behind this feedback loop is to add to the learning process to contribute to the student's well-being. Feedback is most effective when delivered with specifics, for example, by written and oral means. When it is not specific, it might be less effective and might not provide the learners with the information that they require for improved performance. Studies show that feedback is only as effective as the assessor who delivers it. Each assessor has personal characteristics such as goals, performance theories, or moods that might affect the assessment outcome (Govaerts et al., 2013); however, Folkman (2006) adds that the missing characteristic, constructiveness, should be included.

## **Peer Feedback**

Feedback occurs daily. The frequency, quality, and use are the necessary fundamentals for its effectiveness (Folkman, 2006). Topping (2009) defined peer feedback as feedback that is provided to "equal status learners" in situations where students are assessing each other, and sharing one-way and reciprocated assessments. Each student is paired by shared strengths and weaknesses; as the teacher introduces peer assessment to the classroom, constant and fast-paced return is emphasized as valuable to the students. Peer feedback can be confirmatory, suggestive, or corrective; once students are comfortable in the role of the assessor, the reliability and validity increase (Topping, 2009).

Cartney (2010) drew attention to the student's learning ability when providing feedback. In addition, the concept of *feed-forward* was introduced, which was used to stress the need for active participation during feedback sessions. A common theme throughout the literature was the

anxiety of both the assessed and the assessor. When students are separated into smaller workgroups, the anxiety disappears. A contributing factor is the clarity of assessment standards and criteria. Although this reduced anxiety, feedback varied, depending on the person delivering it. There was a lack of consistency for each workgroup, which proved that bridging the gap was yet a challenge. Although the feedback given was accepted, assessments were not well received (Cartney, 2010).

After describing the meaning of peer feedback, a challenge remains with implementing it and using it in the classroom and, subsequently, the workplace. van Gennip et al. (2010) examined peer feedback as a tool for learning intervention. They described this tool as a social process because of the limited evidence of the effects that this model has on learning. van Gennip et al. discussed peer feedback through assessment as pseudo-synonymous to team learning because each student, although assessed by peers, should learn from each other. Feedback is a collaborative process whereby the importance of peer feedback should filter to the assessed student for acceptance prior to implementation. How students view this type of learning is important, and students often experience differing emotions while providing peer feedback. As students experience interplay with feedback, they might gain the confidence that would lead to an increase in the perceived fairness of the process.

### **Benefits of Feedback**

Benefits of using peer feedback, through research, are that peer feedback is better for students than peer assessment; however, when combined, they provide essential information that produces greater positive results. Peer feedback allows students to be active learners who can provide feedback, self-assess, and then take corrective action to improve their work. During a study, students were observed feeling discomfort in providing grades to their peers, questioning

each other's reliability and expertise. This type of social learning concluded with increased development of reflection, listening, and action from feedback. This work led to a greater understanding that feedback will vary depending on the study conducted. According to Liu and Carless (2006), peer feedback aids learning; however, when combined with assessment appears to be more effective. As a result, group work improved, along with long-term timesaving, and achieving a collaborative learning environment. Liu and Carless concluded by describing how to implement peer feedback and assessment in the classroom, and how to close by conducting an evaluation. Similar to assessments and feedback, evaluations can also be subjective or objective. One method of limiting the subjective nature of feedback is to blend assessments, feedback, and evaluations.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) stated, "Leadership is a dialogue, not a monologue" (p. 518), which reflects the principles that leaders can and should practice. The importance of knowing what to do in relation to how to do a task, while attempting to enlist others in believing and acting upon the goal, cannot be achieved without three essential practices: "Listen deeply to others; discover and appeal to a common purpose; and give life to a vision by communicating expressively, so that people can see themselves in it" (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 519).

In relation to dialogue, transformative learning includes strengthening the students' thoughts on their beliefs, assumptions, and understandings. To challenge the students, and for them being able to challenge themselves by having a nonbiased view others' beliefs, assists the learning process through questioning the status quo and presented dogmas of society. The goal for students is being able to think critically.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) stated, “The members of the organization must understand, accept, and commit to the vision” (p. 518). Thus, to commit to the vision, the student must understand the list of feedback benefits. Five benefits are summarized with supporting examples:

1. **Skills development:** When providing feedback, learning occurs. The recipient should understand the provider’s intent of bettering his or her performance. This actionable benefit is set to clarify what was done, and what needs to be improved upon.
2. **Performance:** In line with skill development, doing is an offset to understanding how to do. This is referred to as theory versus practice. Once feedback on “how to” is received, the student can then perform.
3. **Personal and intellectual development:** The common denominator is development. Feedback is a process, and a continuous loop. With different ways to learn, feedback can influence and ignite both personal and intellectual development.
4. **Cognitive competencies:** Understanding that learning includes cognitive ability, once the student understands, he or she might seek additional knowledge.
5. **Social competencies:** Speaking to others awakens comfort and confidence in future behaviors. This is assuming the feedback provided is healthy. No research proves that negative feedback impairs social interactions; therefore, one can assume that any feedback can increase a student’s ability.

### **Weaknesses of Feedback**

Contrasting opinions of the effectiveness of feedback, Wiggins (2012), Hattie (2008), and Cartney (2010) listed three major weaknesses with supporting examples:

1. Teaching: If the assessor does not understand how to provide useful feedback, it can be taught; if it is recognized that the assessor providing the feedback is incapable, the student suffers.
2. Assessment: Feedback and assessment are not synonymous. As aforementioned in the feedback loop, the assessment occurs before feedback is provided, and should not be confused as a form of assessment.
3. Temperaments: This weakness can be both a benefit and weakness. However, it is placed in the weakness category because temperaments are often ignored when observing and responding to the student's actions. If temperaments were included, understanding the basis of their behaviors might allow for building greater understanding of how each person learns best.

Among the available research selected, the instruction of assessment, and the teacher–student dialogue are critical and necessary. Observing this interaction, either party might experience anxiety. To reduce these feelings, peer assessments might be the answer.

The description of feedback and its role in education is important. Cartney (2010) and (Topping, 2009) conclude that feedback is among the most formidable influences, and a precursor to achievement. Aimed at improving the student and his or her performance outcomes, giving each one specific, tailored, goal oriented, actionable, and timely information is essential (Wiggins, 2012). In this review, the researcher discussed feedback as an ongoing process; the opportunities for success increases when feedback is presented upon completion or at the deadline.

## **Unexplored Variables of Feedback**

The literature explored surrounding feedback had not addressed other characteristics, which might affect human behavior in the organization. Characteristic 1 is that emotions are associated with feedback. How people feel is very important when listening or reading about their performance. Characteristic 2, the environment, is yet an important variable in studies. Not all participants are comfortable in the same setting. Moreover, for Characteristic 3, generational differences on feedback receptivity, the assessor's expertise and the student's interpretation of what was provided were not addressed. Characteristic 4, having emotional responses while receiving feedback, is generally difficult to accept (Stone & Heen, 2014); when participating in feedback, emotional triggers should be understood. Researchers should ask this question: What are the emotional triggers of feedback, and the receivers' receptivity towards it? Lastly, concerning Characteristic 5, insufficient information is available concerning the differences between the subjectivity and objectivity of the assessor, which is important to use with a set feedback criterion.

Feedback is not exhaustive, or an impractical method of evaluating students. A common fallacy about feedback is it might demoralize students and impair their motivation towards increased performance. No studies during the research proved this fear true. Therefore, the researcher explored motivational factors to show that to continue to help student's progress towards successful completion of the assigned task by providing valuable feedback reinforces the set standard.

## **Transferring Learning to Task**

Feedback is critical in any learning process; it allows the student to navigate through the differences between actual and desired knowledge (Butler, Marsh, & Godbole, 2012).

Making an error in an academic environment can lead to obtaining necessary understanding of what should be learned. As Chun (2012) stated,

Just as we understand that what is taught is not the same as what is learned, we also know that if the goal is to ensure that students have gained knowledge and skills particular to an individual course, it is insufficient to focus solely on teaching without also measuring what was actually learned. (p. 23)

Transferring what students learn into the workplace is not one-dimensional or linear; rather, the complex transfer of knowledge is multidimensional and directly equates to learning (Dinsmore et al., 2014). In this study, the term “transfer” is the process of learning what is known and transforming it into what can be applied. A goal of learning includes the ability to transfer skills and knowledge; if no performance tasks are provided, the students are unable to master the content knowledge and skills necessary for the work environment. Hence, an assessment of teaching practice might identify differences, then promote better student learning. If successful, students can practice developing critical thinking skills without sacrificing course content. If achieved, the use of feedback through understanding students’ experiences, might serve as the bridge to shrink the gap between how to learn and what to do with what is learned.

The ability for students to transfer learning might be influenced by the ability to notice, recognize, and create meaning out of a perceived problem and to connect it to the academic course. As previous experience contributes to learning, so prior knowledge helps to facilitate future learning and the application of what one understands about how to apply what has been learned. Although one might depend on the student’s previous experience for the progress to their understanding and application, education is equally important. Added to the learning process, education might increase the student’s motivation to learn. When information is



processed in the student's mind, it will likely be remembered if opportunities exist for regular activities that includes practice, application activities, and feedback (Russell, 2006).

### **Summary**

In summary, the researcher reviewed the literature on adult learning, investigating feedback and assessment, and transferring learning to the workplace. To obtain best practices in education for feedback, reviewing past and current feedback models is necessary. Additionally, adult learning contributes to the dialogue that improves the knowledge of understanding the experiences of student learning, and challenge associated with each.

Through continued research, the researcher has found that personal and professional experience is an important aspect of development. Human behavior can be unpredictable; many theorists have discussed this unpredictability, especially in a learning environment. The available work is limited; therefore, the researcher notes that studies concerning adult learning experiences conducted with a qualitative method are also limited, indicating that, as generations shift, the methodology associated with studying feedback is important.

### **Conceptual Framework**

In guiding this research towards an understanding of the meaning of the SEA graduates' experiences of learning how to use the coursework, the researcher used four approaches. This framework extended beyond identifying a student's perception of the information received and putting it to use. The conceptual framework of this study was taken from theoretical approaches that focus on exploring how SEA graduates describe their experiences of applying the coursework for use in their workplace.

The researcher connected the major characteristics of inquiry and designed the study to serve as a plan that could provide a rational and methodical association to answer best the

research questions. For the purpose of this study, the experiences of SEA students during the learning process aid the context of constructing this framework by combining how adults learn, using a community while learning, practicing feedback, and the resultant using of these processes combined in the workplace.

### **Adult Learning**

Balancing the responsibilities of daily life, while attempting to pursue higher education, can be a stressful task. The current workplace requires adults to learn continuously to meet the growing need for talent and expertise. Adult learners will have to seek creatively opportunities to increase their formal education by navigating through a variety of obstacles. These learners are motivated to seek higher education, particularly when faced with life changes, which might challenge them to improve personally or professionally. This identifiable trait of adult learners, mixed with their prior experiences, identifies differing expectations from child learners.

Knowles (1968) explained that the characteristics of adult learners are noticeably different from child learners. Knowles used andragogy to expound on those assumptions and to discuss the value of learning as a process. Therefore, andragogy serves as an umbrella for this researcher's study design. In the study of andragogy, the researcher assumed that adult learners each possess (a) a self-concept, (b) previous learning experience, (c) the readiness to learn, (d) an orientation to learning, and (e) motivation to learn.

In addition, six assumptions are set within the theory of andragogy: (a) the reasoning or the why behind learning the topic, (b) adults are self-directed learners, (c) adult learners bring a wealth of experience to the educational setting, (d) adults enter educational settings ready to learn, (e) adults are problem-centered in their learning, and (f) adults are best motivated by internal factors (Knowles, 1990). These assumptions contrast with that of pedagogy, in which

learners are dependent students who bring little or no experience to the educational setting and learners are present because their presence is mandated and not because it is their sole personal desire.

Knowles (1990) envisioned adult learning as a lifelong journey, and once the learner is taught the lesson and has a supportive environment, over time, learning is recognized as a dynamic and interactive experience. Therefore, Knowles (1984) defined andragogy as both an art and science of facilitating adult learning. Complementing Knowles' concept of andragogy, Mezirow (1991) proposed in the transformative learning theory that learning is an understanding in which a person creates frames of references that lead to freeing biases to gain greater knowledge. The common themes of this theory are experience, critical reflection, and rational discourse. Making meaning of the student's experience is a defining characteristic of how adults integrate their self-concept, personality, emotional patterns, and learning styles to transform learning (Mezirow, 1991). When this concept is blended with andragogy, an understanding of learning and the student's motivation and readiness to learn are better constructed (Mezirow, 2000).

Knowles (1990) and Mezirow (1991) valued using the community to enhance learning. Therefore, adult learning places an emphasis on learning as a process rather than on the subject being taught. Adults require approaches from their teachers. The techniques used to facilitate must be as diverse as the experiences, skills, talents, and knowledge the students bring to the classroom. These exceptional resources to the learning environment are invaluable and cannot be ignored. The SEA's curriculum can guide the students' understanding; however, to challenge their assumptions and to identify what they need to know, peer interaction via the community of SEA students and graduates is need to achieve the curriculum goals.

## **Communities of Practice**

Improving performance within an organization might be accomplished through acknowledging a need for and empowering the formation of communities of practice. These communities are people who engage in collective learning by sharing information about a shared interest through various venues (Wenger, 1998). To form this concept, three characteristics must exist: domain, community, and practice (Wenger, 1998). Thus, the domain, Characteristic 1, is the shared interest of the group, including individual competency on the subject. In the community, Characteristic 2, relationships exist that enable people to learn from one another. Much of what adults learn and how they learn it is dependent on and inseparable from group interactions and relationships. In this forum, discussions occur, hence, the continued sharing of information. Characteristic 3, practice, is the resources used to address the concern or problem. Communities of practices might exist in several environments, depending on the overall goal. In the researcher's study of the SEA graduates, the community was those who were seeking experience; therefore, as a collective group, they collaborated to put into practice what they had learned.

In a collaborative learning environment, students learn from each other and from their teachers. The environment is filled with interaction and activities that play a noteworthy part in collaboration. This collaboration includes a transmission of information down to the learner, and understanding the use of information through interactions with those involved in the learning process. Regarding social development, Vygotsky (1987) posited that formulating language is foundational to the construction of knowledge. Furthermore, Vygotsky argued that the progression from actual to potential development occurs with guidance from expert counsel. Vygotsky called this progression the zone of proximal development (ZPD), through which a

separation occurs between the learning and the cognitive developmental processes. Vygotsky (1978) argued that the developmental process does not happen simultaneously with learning processes, but pointed out that the learning process precedes the developmental process. Thus, collaboration is necessary for students to achieve a higher cognition. This was an important component in Vygotsky's research, for collaboration was viewed as the connection that supports the transfer of knowledge, and ZPD as its motivating factor.

Another viewpoint is the situative–socio-historic viewpoint. This viewpoint is used to explain that the people are inseparable from their communities and environments. In this view, knowledge is distributive in social, material, and cultural artifacts of the environment, and learning occurs and is motivated by the developing of identities within the communities in which people reside or participate. Learning opportunities should encourage participation in the inquiry with the supportive researcher, and should help to discipline the student's practices. An example of this would be using analogies. Within groups, if a person can supplement the learning by using another person to convey familiarity with important aspects of the topic, this parallel will bring learning in concert with the teacher's goals (Gardner, 1999). Concisely, learning should be grounded in problems meaningful to the student (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012).

With the cognitive approach, researchers seek to understand and describe the working of the mind. Knowledge includes reflection, conceptual growth and understanding, problem solving, and reasoning. Using previous workplace and learning experiences contributes to knowledge that includes the active reconstruction of building new knowledge. Thus, many individuals learn more effectively in-group settings; therefore, the community engagement within groups is said to occur naturally, and the motivation to maintain it is essential, which leads to the use of feedback (Gardner, 1999).

## **Feedback**

While in attendance at the SEA, students are assigned readings, engage in instructor–student dialogue, and are asked to solve problems in case studies. The students do not practice applying active communication skills, leadership styles and theories, organizational behavior, and professionalism through instructor-led course. The course curriculum does not identify how to use the information, which might lead to ambiguous expectancies of what and how SEA graduates should apply in their workplace. As aforementioned, students are expected to graduate from the SEA prepared to apply the techniques and skills from the coursework to lead sailors effectively. However, without interactive, instructor-led development, this information might only be discussed and gained within their peer group.

As an essential part of personal and professional development, peer interaction is often associated with performance; this includes feedback provided by peers. The motive behind the feedback stems from the lifelong learning concept, which is achieved through quantitative and qualitative forms of feedback. Feedback is most effective when it is delivered with specifics by narrative and verbal means. When it is not specific, it is less effective and does not provide learners with the assessment required for improved performance. van Ginnip et al. (2010) examined peer feedback as a tool for learning intervention. This tool is also described as a social process tool because team learning is collaborative.

Lave's (1991) theory supported the use of a group of students engaging in the same assignment, working together as a team, and sharing feedback for performance improvement. Currently, using the conventions of adult learning, the researcher used transformative learning through a constructivist view to present a brief description of knowledge, learning, and the utility

of feedback. The points presented might aid the learner in transforming from receiving feedback to applying it, and thence to increasing performance effectiveness in the workplace.

### **Taking Learned Knowledge into the Workplace**

Taking what is studied in the classroom into the workplace is multifaceted; the transfer of knowledge is an integral part of the learning process (Dinsmore et al., 2014). Therefore, one of the goals of learning is to use effectively the skills and knowledge gained from the classroom. If successful, students can expand through practice and can develop critical thinking skills without sacrificing experiential knowledge or the course's content.

The SEA has the ability to leverage senior enlisted personnel who will return to the workplace with refined or new knowledge, and who will have a network of graduates who can provide a sense of community. As adult learners, they will have the ability to transfer learning; however, that learning might be influenced by their ability to notice, recognize, and create meaning out of the perceived problem and to connect it to the academic course. Depending on the students' previous experience, their progress from understanding to applying the education gained is equally important.

## CHAPTER 3:

### METHODOLOGY

The qualitative method, as Creswell (2013) stated, “Informs the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). To address this meaning the researcher used the constructivist view to approach and guide the study. The researcher inquired through various strategies the multiple meanings of individual experiences (Merriam, 2009). Therefore, this study was participatory and required the researcher to sift through the subjectivity of meaning of the participants’ experiences. The need for participants to share their experiences required empowerment from the researcher so that their voices could be heard. Hence, this inquiry upheld the fit of the qualitative method as the best approach.

The purpose of this study was to explore how SEA graduates experienced applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace. To understand reflexively the meaning of the students learning experience the researcher drew important inferences about the SEA’s curriculum and, therefore, the achievement of the SEA’s mission. Studying graduate’s experiences versus their academic performance can provide valuable insights that can contribute to qualitative research and the SEA (Madsen, 2009).

To help choose a specific methodology under the qualitative umbrella, researchers Braud and Anderson (1998) wrote, “Many of the most significant and exciting life events and extraordinary experiences—moments of clarity, illumination, and healing—have been systematically excluded from conventional research” (p. 3). This statement supported the qualitative necessity that a quantitative approach could not capture. The participants’ experiences



were too important to be ignored. Hence, the most applicable methodology to understanding the student's experiences is the phenomenological approach, which was chosen for this study.

While investigating the phenomenological method, the researcher explored the philosophical perspectives of phenomenologists. It is important to note the link between phenomenology and constructivism in their approaches to learning. For instance, an individual observation of the world and how each person experiences a phenomenon are considered multiple perspectives, and each holds an accepted interpretation of one's reality, which is their lived experience. To elaborate, van Manen (1997) wrote:

[Phenomena] have something to say to us—this is common knowledge among poets and painters. Therefore, poets and painters are born phenomenologists. Or rather, we are all born phenomenologists; the poets and painters among us, however, understand very well their task of sharing, by means of word and image, their insight with others—an artfulness that is also laboriously practiced by the professional phenomenologist. (p. 41)

Exploring phenomenology, knowing its history, and understanding the importance of its current use are critical for accurate exploration. Phenomenologists have certain beliefs and hold positions according to their own presuppositions of being detached from their study. Thus, the intention of the research must be held in favor of unearthing the information from the research participants. Gathering data through participant engagement about the phenomenon began with a clear understanding of the methodology.

Moustakas' (1994) explained that phenomenology is focused on the whole experience; therefore, it is the researcher's duty to identify the essence of the experience. Moustakas viewed a person's experience and behavior as integrated and, at times, inseparable when experiencing a phenomenon. This integration of experiences and behavior through people's firsthand accounts

uncovered the meanings of the participant's daily experiences, which contributed to developing an understanding of the phenomena studied. This emphasizes the importance of a person's perspective by gaining insights on the person's reasons for an action, which can reduce making assumptions. Thus, researchers of phenomenological traditions suggest that describing, rather than explaining, frees the researcher from preconceptions or needing to have a hypothesis (Lester, 1999).

Considering this, the father of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl (1980), responded to the traditional scientific methods of study with a rigorous inquiry method to understand human consciousness. Husserl rejected the idea that objects in the outer world are independent and that the information regarding them is reliable. What Husserl believed is reliable is the immediate experience of the conscious person, which reduces the outer world and forms a reality known as phenomena (Groenewald, 2004). Husserl's (1980) focus on a state of consciousness as a descriptive analysis involved the realm of real experience, which explains why phenomenology is mainly the science of essences.

Following Husserl's (1980) phenomenology, Heidegger's (1988) primary focus was on the meaning, that is, the notion of *being*. Heidegger's description of being included what people talk about, have in their view, and how people comport themselves. Essentially, being is not a thing or cannot be defined, but describes what it is to be. This is the dialogue between a person and his or her world.

Phenomenology is popularly separated between Husserl's (1980) descriptive, and Heidegger's (1988) interpretive frameworks. Both of these approaches reflect insights that lead to the meaning of the phenomena being studied; yet, they are fundamentally dissimilar.

Nevertheless, the commonality in both methods was the role that the researcher assumed when listening to descriptions and experiences from the participants.

In the interpretive method, the researcher used prior knowledge and insights to uncover the true meanings as the participants described them, and then searched for the relationships between the acquired knowledge and context (Kleiman, 2004). While conducting the research, it was important for the researcher to consider personal biases. With the interpretive approach, the researcher's personal experiences or knowledge influenced the understanding of the phenomena, which was significant during the interpretation phase.

In addition, in the descriptive method was used whereby the researcher strived to not make interpretations. The researcher instead explored the descriptions that the participants provided by and separated them into meaningful statements, and then took those meaningful statements to construct the studied phenomenon (Giorgi, 1997). The descriptive method, as the approach for this phenomenon, was used to reveal what was unknown about the SEA graduates lived experiences from the classroom to the workplace. Descriptive phenomenology calls for the researcher to reduce the world from how he or she naturally perceives it because inherent, unwanted biases or preconceptions might influence the study (Dowling, 2007). The reduction (bracketing) of the researcher allowed the researcher to suspend personal judgments while involved in the study.

Again, the most precise approach in exploring the experiences of SEA graduates who are immersed into the workplace was descriptive phenomenology. The questions below were designed to provide a better understanding of adult learning experiences after the SEA. A significant gap in the qualitative study exists between the student's learning experience and his

or her ability to apply the learned information. The researcher used two questions to explore and address the gap in the literature:

1. How did SEA graduates describe using their personal and organizational experiences in the professional learning environment?
2. What is the meaning of the SEA graduates' experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?

For the purpose of this study, and to understand the meaning of the participant's experiences, the researcher used Creswell's (2013) phenomenology as a combination of Moustakas' (1994) and van Manen's (1997) research. Combining the two scholars' previous work, the researcher posited that phenomenon was the lived experiences of the several individuals being studied. The adjoining commonalities among the individuals researched are necessary to gain the overall participant experience. Within this approach, all of the participants had shared commonalities as they experienced the phenomenon, for they described what they experienced and how they experienced it. Similar to Moustakas (1994), Creswell (2013) agreed that phenomenology is a concise method that leads to the discovery of the essence, which is consistent with what and how the phenomenon occurred. Creswell's concept of the phenomenological study was applied for the data analysis, which is described later in this chapter. The richness of the textual descriptions of this methodology was ideal for investigating personal experiences. This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the setting, the participant sample, the data, the analysis, the participants' rights, and the potential limitations of the study.

### **Setting**

The SEA is located in Newport, Rhode Island, and is a tenet school of the U.S. NWC. The SEA educates approximately 1,200 students annually. The student body comprises of active

and reserve personnel from the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the U.S. Coast Guard. To educate the annual student population, the SEA employs military and civilian instructors, and support staff members.

The researcher was geographically displaced from the SEA and the participant's workplace; therefore, the setting of this study was in the researcher's home office. The researcher's home office provided a flexible means of collecting data that eliminated interruptions during the participants' workday, and avoided possible constraints that the external environment could have set. Creswell (2013) noted, "To study one's own workplace, for example, raises questions about whether good data can be collected when the act of data collection may introduce a power imbalance" (p. 151).

As a prior SEA instructor, the researcher employed epoché to bracket possible personal biases, and set preconceptions aside to maintain integrity of the study. This concept was difficult to accomplish, but necessary for clear and intentional reflection and practice. For this situation and study interest, this approach was ideal. Again, this study focused on the graduate's experiences while learned how to apply the SEA coursework in their individual work environments. The two research questions were used to focus on what and how they experienced the phenomenon.

### **Participant Sample**

The first step in collecting data was to select the study's participants. The sample was representative of the SEA's graduate population. The participant sample is a subgroup of approximately 35,000 U.S. Navy senior enlisted sailors in ranks E7–E9, not all of whom attended or will attend the SEA. When considering how large the sample size should be, Englander (2012) dispelled the myth that a large sample size was the prerequisite for generalizing

a population. The participants represented a variety of U.S. Navy workplaces, including ships, aircraft squadrons, submarines, and land-based installations. The study sample size included eight SEA graduates. As the researcher, to determine data saturation for the purpose of this study, the participants who were chosen represented a small sample size of the general senior enlisted population. Creswell (2013) added that, within purposeful sampling particularly for the phenomenological method and as variables during the data collection, the researcher should consider a narrow range of participants who (a) have experienced the phenomenon, (b) are in the sampling type that is central to the phenomenon, and (c) comprise a sufficient sample size, whether the amount of participants be small or large. This sampling technique for selecting participants was the key to receiving rich information for the study.

Coyne (1997) encouraged having participants who could expound on the questions for the purpose of the study. Those selected had a broad and experiential knowledge of the subject that was contributory to the study. These participants were intentionally sought to meet the intent of the study (Coyne, 1997). For the selection, the criterion for inclusion was predetermined before drawing the sample. Purposeful sampling was not intended to attain population validity, but was used with the intent of achieving a thorough and in-depth understanding of each participant (Patton, 1990). This also best identified with obtaining an information-rich study drawn from personal experiences (Patton, 1990). The SEA graduates selected for the study were

1. within 12 months postgraduation,
2. serving in the military pay grade E9, and
3. had 12 years or more time in the service.

First, in these criteria, the prescribed time for postgraduation allowed each graduate to reintegrate into his or her workplace. Although no set time was directed for the best

implementation of coursework, the course material was considered *fresh* and easily accessible from memory if completed within the last 12 months. Second, the design of the SEA was meant primarily for E8s; however, for this study, E9s were the focus because E9s were at the top of the enlisted ranks and are not able to be promoted to a higher rank, but could only assume a higher responsibility. Third, the time of service signified the years that the graduate had served on active duty, which represented a level of seniority in the U.S. Navy. This seniority represented a range of proficiency in responsibilities within their technically focused *rating* or occupational specialty, leaving their nontechnical leadership expertise less represented.

In addition to being a prior SEA instructor and a graduate of the SEA, objectivity during this study led to a necessary awareness of the researcher's biases of bracketing, whether done unconscious or consciously. Bracketing was meant to remove, as much as possible, the researcher's experiences that might influence interpretations of the participants' description of the phenomenon. As an SEA graduate, the researcher did not take part in this study, but used bracketing by noting the possibilities of hindering the integrity of the research. To prevent disrupting the study, constant reflection during the research process was used. After describing the participants and the sample of the study, the Data section explains data collection used in this inquiry.

### **Data**

The preferred method for phenomenological research data collection was face-to-face interviews, which were used to gain insights into the experiences of the participants. The importance of interviewing the SEA graduates went beyond exploring their experiences. Englander (2012) agreed that the main source of data collection for phenomenological studies

should be interviews. According to Merriam (2009), to obtain a “special kind of information” (p. 88), interviewing would allow the researcher to gain insight that could not be observed.

Creswell (2013) noted the “importance of reflecting about the relationship that exists between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 173). The type of interview selected was semistructured. This interview type included open-ended questions for which the interviewer used impromptu questioning to gather additional information on the flow of the conversation. The interviews were conducted over the telephone and by written descriptions gathered from participants (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007).

Prior to all interviews, the researcher obtained written consent to record the interview to facilitate collecting the data from the participants; each participant had an opportunity to describe in full his or her lived experiences. A few broad, data-generating questions were asked to begin the interview process. The researcher used probes, as necessary, to clarify the meaning of responses and to encourage in-depth descriptions. Searching for data using the broad open-ended questioning method during the interview allowed the researcher to ask immediately for clarification or expansion of the participant’s thoughts. The researcher was able to access verbal cues that were important to the richness the study.

This rigor of conducting the phenomenological study assisted the researcher in understanding the human phenomena through the participants lived experiences (Sanders, 1982). Before the researcher was exposed to a person’s life’s experience, it was important to know internal or external influences that affected their consciousness (Penner & McClement, 2008). A look into their consciousness was available through their reflection and interpretation as they described their lived world.



Through this qualitative research, guided by a phenomenological lens for data collection and interpretation, the researcher interviewed eight SEA graduates because Dukes (1984, as cited in Creswell, 2013) and Riemen (1986, as cited in Creswell, 2013) discussed sample size, in which they agreed that a sample of 5–25 participants would suffice in a phenomenological study and for data saturation. Paying close attention to individual frames of reference during the interviews resulted in an understanding of the subjective aspects of SEA graduates. This data highlighted the personal experiences in a rich description and meaning for the study's purpose.

The participants who were exposed to this phenomenon were selected from the SEA graduate database. This database is available and maintained at the U.S. NWC, but is not available to the public. The participants who were excluded from this study were the population of students who were taught by the researcher; the researcher chose the study participants from the pool of all other prior students.

Reviewing Creswell's (2013) description of multiple individual interviews for data collection clarified how to obtain the participants shared experiences. The interviews were the primary means of data collection; therefore, this process consisted of two rounds of interviews with the same 10 participants. The first round informed what information was necessary for the study. The second interview constituted any additional clarification that was needed from the first interview. The data that was retrieved exposed the participant's conscious experience as lived. Each interview lasted 15–22 minutes, and was recorded via the iPad recording application. During the interview, the participants responded to semistructured and open-ended questions related to his or her experience as an SEA student. The follow-up questions were based on the participant's responses. During the interview, standard questions were used, but they did not

dictate the flow of the interview. The semistructure freed the researcher to ask probing questions that arose from the participant's answers or interests.

During the interview, the researcher was challenged with the need to suppress biases, viewpoints, and assumptions. Among other techniques, using Merriam's (2009) recommended epoché to refrain from judgment was synonymous to bracketing. This compartmentalization occurred when the researcher was able to block off certain memories that might have resurfaced when triggered by the study. Completing the interview process of data collection, the succeeding phase in the process was an analysis of the information gathered.

### **Analysis**

The qualitative data analysis was a process that included, inspecting, organizing, and transferring the collected data into a useable construct for explaining, understanding, or interpreting the phenomenon being studied. Sought as the most thorough and explained method, phenomenology guided the researcher in this analysis to make sense of the information (Creswell, 2013). The information collected was significant experiences in which it was the researcher's responsibility to be fully immersed to understand and appropriately handle the data. Data that is misanalysed could discredit the study; therefore, it could lead to inaccurate resultant information (Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012). This data analysis consisted of steps that would keep the research grounded and focused on the task. Following Creswell's (2013) six steps was necessary to analyze the data to inform better the researcher and reader.

1. Describe the personal experiences of the researcher with the phenomenon. In detail, the researcher explained the connection to the phenomenon being studied. This step helped the researcher identified any biases and assumptions that affected or influenced the study.

2. Develop a list of significant statements. This step allowed each statement not to overlap. The researcher reflected on these statements for content and meaning.
3. Group the significant statements into larger units of information and themes. During this stage, the researcher used NVivo for Mac to categorize and to organize better the information. NVivo for Mac has the capability to code the information for ease of retrieval and use.
4. Write a description of “what” the participants experienced by using verbatim examples. This stage in the analysis is less interpretive and more focused on the actual lived experience.
5. Write a description of “how” the experience happened. This structure includes the location of the phenomenon, and the participant’s rich explanation of his or her experience.
6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon by using both the textural and structural descriptions. In phenomenological studies, this was the culmination step of the analysis in which the essence of the study was discovered.

After completing the initial analysis, to validate the researchers understanding of each participant’s individual accounts of the phenomenon, the researcher conducted an interview with each participant to determine whether his or her responses were correctly interpreted. Each in-depth description of the phenomenon given by each participant influenced the direction and development of the study (Cooper et al., 2012). Furthermore, the accuracy of the data retrieved was vital to the continuation of the study, including the trust placed upon the researcher to conduct proper phenomenological research. The participants’ perspectives were unique and

personal to them; therefore, the researcher discussed their rights and explained their anonymity and protection during this study.

### **Participants' Rights**

The primary method of collecting data for this study was telephone interviews, with written descriptive supplements as necessary. Both collection methods aimed to explore and gather the rich narratives of the SEA graduates. Creswell (2013) provided a sample human subject, consent-to-participate form, which was used as a template to personalize a participant consent form. The participants signed consent forms that detailed the research study, the researcher's expectation of them, and the researcher's responsibility. Once signed, these consent forms were maintained in the researcher's possession and were locked in a personal home safe for protection.

An important consideration for this methodology was Creswell's (2013) comment regarding the "importance of reflecting about the relationship that exists between the interviewer and the interviewee" (p. 173). The confidence and trust of this relationship was important to both the researcher and participant because of the sensitivity of data being collected. Hence, the confidentiality of each participant was important to this study; therefore, their identities were protected. The researcher was the only person who knew who they were. To maintain successfully the participants' anonymity, the researcher used a pseudonym for each person. The pseudonyms had no correlation to the participants, and each participant had the option to change his or her assigned name as preferred.

There were limited risks or discomforts associated with this study. It was difficult to detect or prevent researcher-induced bias and to exercise pure objectivity during the research process. However, the main limitation within this study might have been the researcher's

previous experience as a faculty member, for which the researcher bracketed experiences in an attempt to eliminate any potential biases. Bracketing was challenging for the researcher; therefore, it could have interfered with interpreting the data. One recommendation that the researcher followed was keeping a reflexivity journal to record feelings, positions, and insights.

Each participant had the right to review the data collected and the findings at any time during study. Additionally, each participant had the option to withdraw from the study; the participants were free to dismiss themselves without any repercussions. For this reason, to ensure participant understanding and agreement, all participants received an electronic consent form before the interview, and a verbal overview of the consent form at the time of the interview. Again, with permission, each interview was recorded and they transcribed. These recordings were locked on the iPod rev-recorder recording program with a password, and the recording device was locked in the researcher's personal home safe.

Finally, the participants did not directly benefit from their participation in the research. However, they might have felt some benefit from knowing that their participation in this study might lead to a program that could help others who might later attend the SEA. Additionally, future SEA students might benefit should the study's results be incorporated into a workshop designed to assist students who struggle in educational settings. Finally, the U.S. Navy might also benefit with personnel retention should the workshops prove successful in helping future students complete the SEA, thus, producing a greater pool of candidates who would be eligible for promotion to a higher rank.

### **Potential Limitations of the Study**

This study was conducted on a small-scale, with limited participants. Some potential limitations surrounded the chosen methodology; therefore, a thorough review of the design was

necessary to examine potential limitations. As they were identified, steps that led towards mitigating them were reviewed because complete elimination was not reasonable. A limitation within this study was the researcher's previous experience as an instructor and the process of bracketing the experiences and potential biases. Unrelated to this limitation of the researcher's subjectivity, a few other limitations were accessing the SEA's student directory, the use of telephone interviews instead of face-to-face interviews, and the restriction of the sample size to only SEA graduates and not graduates of other enlisted military leadership schools.

It was difficult to detect or to prevent researcher-induced bias and to exercise pure objectivity during the research process. The researcher was challenged in bracketing, which interfered with interpreting the data. One report recommended keeping a reflexivity journal to record feelings, positions, and insights (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

Again, regarding the SEA's student directory, Creswell's (2013) noted "the researcher reflects more on whom to sample" (p. 155); therefore, the researcher considered an alternate access to the graduates by using the researcher's previous students who to access graduates.

Lastly, face-to-face interviews were ideal for observing nonverbal cues during each conversation. Although participants shared their experiences, some of the meaning was lost because the researcher was not in their physical presence and so was not able to observe part of the phenomenon (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007). To mitigate losing important aspects of the study, the researcher paid particular attention to the paralanguage and tone changes of each participant while conducting the interview via telephone.

Chapter 3 presented the methodology for this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how SEA graduates experienced applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace. The phenomenological study was qualitative and descriptive in design to capture the lived

participant experience. The researcher explored the meanings of the experiences before developing the essence of each experience (Moustakas, 1994). Chapter 3 also provided the study assumptions and limitations, and the participants' rights, including the handling of sensitive information for the content of this study.

## CHAPTER 4:

### RESULTS

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how SEA (SEA) graduates described their experiences of applying the SEA curriculum in the workplace. This study was important because, collectively, adult learners' experiences have been ignored in higher education (Pusser, Breneman, Gansneder, Kohl, Levin, Milam, & Turner, 2007). Therefore, understanding the experiences of eight SEA graduates who completed the SEA within the last year adds to the greater conversation of adult learning.

The SEA offers students leadership education that was meant to enrich their personal and professional lives. This course was designed to be the pinnacle of a SEL's professional military education before assuming additional military leadership roles. With an understanding that each person's experiences were different, this study discovered how each participant felt about his or her overall experience at the SEA, in addition to returning to his or her workplace.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, the use of phenomenology “[b]egins with acknowledging that there is a need to understand a phenomenon from the point of view of the lived experience in order to be able to discover the meaning of it” (Englander, 2012, p. 16). Lin (2013) clarified that, “[a] phenomenon can be an emotion, relationship, or an entity such as a program, an organization, or a culture” (p. 470). Therefore, the meaning of human experiences was explored to contribute to a new or added understanding, which is why it was important for this researcher to enlist participants who were willing to share their experiences.

In this chapter, the researcher reflects on the process for gathering and analyzing the data in concert with the phenomenological methodology. While accommodating participant's



schedules, the interview timeline necessary to gather the data spanned 7 days. The interviews were the main source of data collection. As Englander (2012) suggested, although advice was available regarding the best approach in conducting data collection, for the sake of phenomenological research, interviews were most accurate.

### **Participants**

Creswell (2009) expressed the concept that specific rules do not exist to delineate a sample size in a qualitative study; rather, fullness of the participant's shared experiences should be the focus. This means that, through critical reflection, when evidence of data exhaustion was reached, the interpretation of the phenomenon from participants was clear, which eliminated redundancy.

Perhaps the most effective technique to capture information-rich data for a phenomenological study was the criterion type of purposeful sampling, which was ideal for providing the necessary depth in research (Patton, 1990). Therefore, this sampling approach was used to recruit this study's pool of participants. The participants in the study were from various U.S. Navy workplaces that included ships, aircraft squadrons, submarines, and land-based installations. Of the 40 personnel who met the criteria, eight graduates responded and were subsequently selected to meet the study's sample size.

The criteria for each SEA graduate selected for the study were (a) within 12 months' postgraduation, (b) served in the military Pay Grade E9, and (c) had 12 years or more time in service; in addition, they were in positions of greater responsibility within their military occupation. All participants were E9s in the U.S. Navy. During the warm-up portion of the interviews, the participants provided their postgraduation time, time in pay grade, time in

service, and leadership role—all of which varied. A summary of the criterion, along with each participant’s pseudonym (for identity protection) is shown in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participants’ Profiles*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Postgraduation time (in months)</b>	<b>Years in Pay Grade E9</b>	<b>Years of service</b>	<b>Leadership role</b>
Anchor	11	2	21	Department leading chief petty officer
Barnacle	2	4	24	Department leading chief petty officer
Captain	6	1	20	Department leading chief petty officer
Dolphin	8	2	25	Command master chief
Ensign	11	2	20	Department leading chief petty officer
Frigate	10	5	26	Command master chief
Grog	3	1	19	Command master chief
Hatch	3	4	23	Command master chief

Of the eight participants interviewed, all were eager to share his or her experiences beyond the questions asked. To gain familiarity with each participant, when told, “Describe your professional roles and responsibilities,” and asked, “What feelings did you have about being a SEA graduate?” the responses included their learning expectations, reasons for enrolling, and their career field responsibilities. Briefly, each participant responded, in interviewed order, as follows.

**Anchor**

Anchor joined the Navy directly from high school and did not have any formal higher education prior to attending the SEA. At the time of his attendance, he was a logistics professional who served on multiple ships and aircraft squadrons. There, he was responsible for dozens of sailors and marines, while managing multimillion-dollar budgets. With this responsibility, he reflected that he did not have the time to pursue higher education.

His attraction to the SEA was peaked upon being promoted; he mentioned viewing the school as “kind of like the pinnacle” and continued by adding “and the thought that it was going to make me a better SEL. It was going to make me more well-rounded.” Upon graduating, Anchor returned to his workplace and reported that neither his leadership nor subordinates expected a change in his leadership, but recognized a personal change in his confidence and mannerisms.

**Barnacle**

Tracing her educational experience prior to the SEA, Barnacle did not prepare for attending the SEA. She expressed that she enlisted in the U.S. Navy because she viewed education beyond high school as unimportant. Subsequently, she attended approximately 12 military specific training courses around the country, but did not consider higher education because the pace was “simply too slow.”

After not being selected for command master chief, a position of greater responsibilities, she decided the SEA was necessary for her professional progression because she “knew it was one of the next milestones of my career that I would definitely need.” She was excited to enroll, but attending was “scary” because of other graduates’ previous experiences. Although the course was “challenging in its own regard,” she also aired concerns for returning to her workplace

because she felt “a little intimidated” from the unknown expectations upon her return to the workplace.

### **Captain**

While considering attending the SEA, Captain was promoted to E9. At that time, Captain expressed no longer wanting to enroll to attend the SEA because, professionally, he was at the top of the U.S. Navy’s enlisted rank structure. However, as a college graduate, and an aspiring graduate student, he indicated that learning was interesting and he wanted to contribute more than “planning, execution, maintenance, up-keeps, and inspections of aeronautical maintenance related items” to the 300 personnel he led.

Without much preparation for the SEA, Captain remembers the course providing him with “another outlook on the Navy and its scope . . . because the [workplace] mission is totally different.” Returning to his previous workplace, he conveyed feeling that he was expected to be a more efficient decision maker, and to understand “a higher level of warfare.” In all, he expressed being glad that he had attended.

### **Dolphin**

Upon selection as a command master chief, Dolphin enrolled in the SEA. In his previous role, he served as “a coach, a mentor, a counselor sometimes, a lot of times just somebody that lends an ear.” With this new role, he explained that he was “the voice of good order and discipline, the voice of the enlisted sailors to the commanding officer, the voice of the junior officers to the commanding officer.” Dolphin explained that his role of maintaining the U.S. Navy’s core values is something he takes seriously, and takes with a sense of loyal dedication.

Without any formal higher education beyond high school, his initial thought of the SEA was a means to an end. The negativity he heard from previous graduates about the SEA did not

deter him, for he stated, with toughness, “You don’t want to make your opinion based off of somebody else’s feelings, so I had different expectations leaving there than before I got there.” He later mentioned that his view of the SEA was “not as bad” as what others who had gone before him had stated.

### **Ensign**

While serving on active duty, he attended college for more than 10 years, during which time he earned a Master of Business Administration degree. The last thing on his mind was to return to school. However, an opportunity to attend the SEA was presented, and he saw a way to “gain leadership experience” and to fulfill his goals of advancement into higher leadership roles.

By identifying a fear of public speaking, he nervously mentioned, “I don’t do impromptu very well, and I knew it was going to help me overcome my fears . . . I’m even more intimidated . . . I knew that was definitely one step in the right direction.” Returning to his workplace after expressing a positive SEA experience, he immediately applied “what [they] learned and to . . . communicate [better] so then [they] can help them through [their] own experiences and learning” throughout his workplace.

### **Frigate**

Before enrolling into the SEA, Frigate was a master chief for 5 years. His responsibilities included mentoring, coaching, and “insuring operational effectiveness through the use of good order and discipline . . . effectively using organizational learning processes” to make his workplace more efficient. He attended the SEA because it was mandated because of his selection to hold a position of greater authority as a command master chief.

Feeling that he could contribute years of organizational experience to the learning environment, he mentioned, “I brought my previous experiences, my previously learned

experiences, what I had learned to make me effective, I had brought those to the discussion; [it's] what made me effective.” This was also true upon his return to his workplace where he shared using the new knowledge he learned from the SEA, as needed.

### **Grog**

Grog opted to wait until he was a few months from transferring to another military base and workplace. He enrolled into the SEA while attending college online. As a student, he thought that entering the SEA learning environment would be more challenging than he experienced. He expected that, as a graduate, he would be “better prepared” or become “a better leader,” but in retrospect, as he noted, “I felt more confident in my ability, I mean, I thought I was always okay,” as he reflected on his leadership abilities before attending the SEA. His overall feeling, as confessed, was being underwhelmed with his SEA experience.

Once he arrived at his new workplace, he mentioned that he projected an air of positivity by mentioning that leaders should “immerse themselves with different people to get different perspectives . . . try to build relationships with people that advance in the Navy, [and] that they will challenge [you] to be the best.”

### **Hatch**

As a career sailor, Hatch served on multiple ships around the world. Upon returning to the United States, he had a goal of attending the SEA. His learning background included many technical training schools, in addition to periodically attending college to earn an Associates of Arts degree. The SEA presented another challenge; his mentors spoke of the school as a “waste of time” and equated it to “basic leadership that can be received from reading a book.”

Excited about the SEA’s classroom atmosphere and peer and faculty support, he learned “more about the diversity of leadership styles and approaches.” He claimed being excited to

return to his workplace. He did not have a relationship with his new team of sailors; therefore, he conveyed being able to start clean with his newly learned leadership knowledge.

The eight participants in this research represented a variety of Navy workplaces. They each had varying organizational experiences, and came to this learning community for different reasons where they shared their unique personal and professional proficiencies. Their differing degrees of higher education did not deter them from continuing their professional military educational journey. The next section of this chapter details the analysis of the participant interviews and an exploration of the data.

### **Analysis Method**

Creswell (2013) noted that recent research discussed the “importance of reflecting about the relationship that exists between the interviewer and the interviewee” (p. 173). Establishing the appropriate rapport with each individual first required that the researcher obtain appropriate consent and authorization from each participant. Using Creswell’s (2013) sample, human subjects’, consent-to-participate form as an example, the researcher revised it to make it suitable for this research (see Appendix A). All of the participants received an electronic copy of this form before being interviewed, in addition to a verbal overview of the purpose and scope of the research. Also, clearly articulated within the consent form was the study’s confidentiality of participants, and nonpenalty for withdrawing from the interview.

When responding to questions during the interview, each participant used stories to clarify their statements. For instance, they used personal and professional examples to accentuate and describe their learning experiences. The graduates’ responded to interview questions, sharing their personal and professional organizational experiences, learning experiences, and feelings of

returning to work after being in the SEA learning environment. The interviews lasted 15–22 minutes, and follow-up interviews lasted 7–10 minutes.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore how SEA graduates described their experiences of applying the SEA curriculum in the workplace.

Participant interviews were rooted from two research questions that guided the study:

1. How did SEA graduates describe using their personal and organizational experiences in the professional learning environment?
2. What is the meaning of the SEA graduate's experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?

### **Exploring the Data**

Supporting Creswell's (2013) depiction of Moustakas' (1994) data analysis approach, and using the interview questions in Appendix A, the researcher captured in the analysis important statements during the interviews. Conversely, the graduate's story-filled responses fell in line with Janesick's (2011) concern that researchers should "recognize that all people have stories to tell" (p. 150).

The collected data that resulted from the 12 interview questions were used to answer the two research questions of the targeted participants' experiences of transitioning back into the workplace. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed and became the main contributor of data for the study. The interview recordings and transcripts were reviewed three times to capture the intent and tone of the conversation.

The phenomenological method of analyzing data to discover the meaning of this study started with completing a description of the researcher's experience and prejudgments, and then setting them aside or bracketing them to focus on those being interviewed. According to



Creswell (2013), the participant's experiences must be decoded into understandable terms without eliminating or losing pertinent facts that describe the study's outcome. This begins with analyzing the collected data then grouping them for a clear description of the phenomenon before reporting the findings (Giorgi, 1997). The researcher followed Creswell's (2013) six steps to analyze the data:

1. Describe the personal experiences of the researcher with the phenomenon.
2. Develop a list of significant statements; this allowed each statement not to overlap.  
The researcher reflected on these statements for content and meaning.
3. Group the significant statements into larger units of information and themes.
4. Write a description of what the participants experienced by using verbatim examples.
5. Write a description of how the experience happened.
6. Write a composite description of the phenomenon by using both the textural and structural descriptions. This is the essence, which can be termed as what is common in the participant's experiences.

After the interview transcription was completed, the transcripts were read in completeness, which led to Step 1 that explained the connection of the researcher to the phenomenon being studied. This step helped the researcher to identify any biases and assumptions that affected or influenced the study.

The language used in processing the data for a phenomenological qualitative study in *NVivo for Mac* was slightly different. This program allowed the researcher to select manually the codes to help organize the data. Once the codes were created, the researcher was able to phish for significant statements that would correlate with each code. *NVivo for Mac* was the only method

used to code, gather significant statements, and develop themes to have available for later retrieval and use.

In Steps 2 and 3, coding the interviews during the data analysis was used to group significant statements. Using the raw transcribed data from participant responses, the researcher uploaded each transcription into *NVivo for Mac* for better organization of the data. Once the coding was complete, the themes emerged. Each statement of the participant's experience, if correlated to the themes discovered, was considered (Moustakas, 1994).

In Steps 4 and 5, the analysis focused on the open and rich disclosures of their lived experience; therefore, all statements made by the participants were given equal weight. This approach was the attempt to derive a meaning without eliminating facts, and to understand the individuals through their verbal expressions and perspective. The result was understanding the shared experience of the participants. During these steps, the description of how the experience occurred provided a logical meaning of the data. These descriptions were organized by relatedness. Repetition of statements was excluded from this analysis. Lastly, in Step 6, the description of the phenomenon emerged through detailed descriptions provided in Steps 4 and 5, providing the essence or common experience of the participants, which is later discussed. However, the themes listed below in Table 2 are the result of the interviews.

In closing, the steps of data analysis led to the identification of three thematic groups that correlated to the participant's views of the SEA and their experiences when returned to their workplace. The next part of this process was member checking, which was completed through conducting supplemental interviews with the same participants to determine the accuracy of the research results. Within this practice, each participant was provided a copy of the interpretations for his or her feedback on information accuracy.

## Presentation of Results

By examining the transcriptions of the audio recordings, excerpts of phrases that best characterized the participant's experiences were used. During the review, nothing indicated that one theme was more important than another was. Therefore, the themes are not listed in order of importance, but from recurrence of literal evidence during the oral interview sessions.

### Major Themes

The four themes that emerged during the data analysis are presented from the most to the least frequent (see Table 2). As previously noted, all eight participants' experiences were taken into account. The participants all had diverse organizational experiences; therefore, those experiences emerged through their stories, and within those stories was where other themes emerged.

Table 2

#### *List of Themes*

<b>Main theme</b>	<b>NVivo codes attributed to the themes</b>
1. Each participant contributed to the learning environment.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Preparation for SEA attendance</li> <li>b. Professional experiences</li> <li>c. Personal experiences</li> </ul>
2. Participants disclosed the significance of networking and building a stronger senior enlisted community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Networking and peer interactions</li> <li>b. Learning via the SEA community</li> </ul>
3. Each participant could describe applicable knowledge after attending the SEA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reflection of topics facilitated</li> <li>b. Using information from the SEA</li> <li>c. Feelings about the SEA experience</li> <li>d. Change in leadership approach</li> </ul>

Main theme	NVivo codes attributed to the themes
4. Each participant experienced expectations from subordinates and superiors when returning to the workplace	a. Workplace expectations b. Resistance and praise from coworkers

As shown in the Table 2, the four themes were common across the participant population. These themes are based on a detailed analysis of the information collected through interviews, as well as the results of using *NVivo for Mac* coding.

**Theme 1: Each participant’s contributions to the learning environment.** Each participant contributed to the learning environment. The first theme that appeared while coding the transcriptions was each participant’s contributions to the learning environment. Coming from varying positions of responsibilities, each of the participants ascribed to having strong influence in their workplaces, and when asked to what they attributed their influence, all responded with qualities that surrounded positive behaviors and attitudes. Within this theme, the participants were able to describe their organizational experiences and explain how they felt while navigating through the SEA. Anchor stated:

I thought really the only thing I was going to be able to contribute before I got there was just my personal experiences... That was my thought process, that’s what I believed was going to happen when I got there . . . the experiences and the lessons learned that I was able to hear from them.

Frigate took a long pause before responding then explained, “I didn’t actually think of it that way, I didn’t know that I was going to contribute anything as much as I thought I was going to get them to contribute to me.” Furthermore, during Barnacle’s interview, she communicated her point of view:

I always feel like everybody else out there has more knowledge than I do . . . . I have my specific experiences that I can offer, some [of] it may be interesting to some people, some [of] it may not be interesting but even offering just a different perspective on something that's really what I had to offer and bring to the table at the SEA.

Captain pointed out what he brought to the learning environment:

What I thought I brought to the SEA was a lot of experience. I noticed that a lot of my peers were a lot more junior than I was and I felt that my fleet experience across the last—at that time 20 years—I thought I had a lot to offer. Especially that I served in the east coast, I served west coast, and then I served overseas. I thought I had [experience] with all that stuff and then the various type of tours, I definitely thought I had a lot to offer then.

Ensign indicated that he contributed to the classroom. He spoke freely about the positive atmosphere of the school, which led to his response:

Team building. I like to work together, and we were only there for a short period, so immediately after getting there, we started study groups to work after class was out of session. I knew that [team meetings] was going to be major to helping us all succeed.

This theme described the participant's contributions to the learning environment in which the students conveyed their personal feeling of learning at the SEA. To incorporate previous experiences into the academic environment for later transfer into the workplace activates learning (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 61).

Considering Knowles (1990) adult learning assumptions, when learners are self-directed, they have a sense of ownership for their learning experience. Additionally, their willingness to

learn contributed to each participant's contributions to the learning environment, and appeared while coding the transcriptions.

**Theme 2: Participants disclosed the significance of networking and building a stronger senior enlisted community.** The description of the participants disclosed the significance of networking and building a stronger senior enlisted community. Learning through the interactions with peers is an important tool used throughout higher education. Appropriately, for this theme, Kapucu (n.d.) stated:

Bringing individuals together and forming communities of practice is an important tenet of learning, and learning patterns within a community are particularly important because most of the learning occurs due to human practice and interaction with others.

Communities of practice acts as a catalyst for students to internalize the knowledge they are exposed to and allows them to reach different interpretations of the same knowledge.

While in attendance at the SEA, the participants disclosed the significance of networking and building a stronger senior enlisted community. Anchor, Barnacle, Captain, Dolphin, Ensign, Frigate, Grog, and Hatch stressed that these personal connections with their peers fostered their positive attitudes. In their interactions, they reported not focusing on academic success or failure. They believed that their individual attitude about the coursework was a determinant of their ability to succeed as a group.

Dolphin pointed out the importance of building a network for professional resources, as well as for personal reasons. He explained the importance for the participants to have a community of enlisted leaders they feel could support their future growth after graduating, whether personal or professional:

You get to meet amazing people that you get to connect with, and the network that you get, that is the only thing, that was the only highlight that wasn't mentioned . . . . I don't have to go through my entire workplace seeking an answer, I can go straight to the network. I love the fact that just like, I started out in school with other sailors who did the same thing, and they promoted as well. So, when I need help, I contact them and if they need help, they contact me.

Anchor, Barnacle, Captain, Grog, and Hatch acknowledged their willingness to make personal connections. They spoke of some tangible and intangible benefits that resulted from the connections made while at the SEA. Previous SEA graduates had told both Grog and Hatch that the network of people that they would have would be immeasurable, and life changing. None of them mentioned being forced by the faculty advisors to connect with each other, but they felt as though they could trust their peers. Barnacle explained:

My experience at the SEA. I thought it was a great one. I did learn, I still remember most of the people in the class. We still keep in touch on Facebook type of thing. So, I think the networking thing is a huge one, like I say, we still keep in touch and it's just another school where you are gaining the experience of all those, everyone else in the fleet which is awesome, just gathering the experience from that I would say the networking was a major take away for me as well.

In addition, Anchor shared an experience that backs up the idea and includes the details of building a community:

It was probably one of the best networking experiences of my career. Some of the schoolwork was kind of tedious, and kind of head-scratching . . . . How am I going to apply this? the networking with the other classes, the field trips, the graduation, the

dinners with the class; I still talk to a lot of those guys today, and I never would have met them if I hadn't gone up there, so yeah, the networking. You can't put a price on it.

The participants experienced combining real-world practices that orient with the subject matter, along with the combination of networking which served as a link for the larger learning environment (Knowles, 1990).

**Theme 3: Each participant could describe applicable knowledge after attending the SEA.** The next theme to emerge from the interview coding was each participant could describe applicable knowledge after attending the SEA. "Learners . . . are more motivated when they can see the usefulness of what they are learning and when they can use that information to do something that has an impact on others" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 61). Anchor, Barnacle, Captain, Dolphin, Ensign, Frigate, Grog, and Hatch reflected that an important component of the SEA was to provide clear direction of how the education received related to their workplace, and how they will transition back into their leadership role after graduation. Ensign began by discussing what was useful and helped in his journey after the SEA:

I don't know if it was specifically conflict management. I don't know the title, but I remember when they were talking about working through the issues and making sure that the different roles within that environment included a time-keeper, and the scribe, and basically how to run that environment so it was more productive instead of just another meeting that wasted peoples' times. I think that was very applicable. [Also] impromptu's. I would have to come up with interesting topics and conversations when you are meeting new people and peak their interest. That [impromptu speaking activity] helped a little bit. Not the entire SEA [is applicable] but there were portions of it of which I retained because obviously you don't retain all of it. I wouldn't say the entire course, though.



Barnacle, Frigate, and Hatch echoed not recalling specific topics, but could describe the information gained that would help them build skills to better support the sailors in their workplace. Barnacle emphasized:

Gosh, I'm trying to remember the specific topics. I remember the papers; I would say I liked the papers. I would say one of the topics that I liked was communication; that was one of the big ones in the class; I always like learning about communication because I'm a big communicator, I think. Let me see. For my role in the workplace (I'm trying to think of what the topic was) when we talked about the different countries and giving our reports and oral presentations from the other countries; I didn't necessarily think that applied to me and my role here; however, it does apply to those who are on ships or bigger platforms, I think that is beneficial . . . . I was in a mentor session with one of my sailors and I used an example of thinking outside the box and not within our little world. So, that will probably be my biggest takeaway when I talk to people about the SEA, it just taught me to think globally.

Dolphin mentioned having a memory lapse of the exact topic, but commented how engaging with others by using the subject helped him connect better:

I don't know the lesson topic name but there were lessons on communication flow. There were lessons on how to conduct a proper meeting, or any type of meeting, and how to put time requirements to stay on track. There was the different type of learners, the different leadership styles. All of that is great, great information. What was the name of that study? It was a study and the name of the person that it was named after escapes me now, but it let me know the type of person that I was and how I am [speaking of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator].

He continued by stating:

The first time that I encountered something that was taught at the SEA was extemporaneous speaking . . . . [Also], the three-part communications method. I used that in writing all the time when I want to communicate things and want to close up loose ends so we both leave that room on the same page. The three-part communications method has definitely helped.

Ensign's thoughts were relatable to Barnacle's focus, and not concentrating on what was expected of him, but what he could contribute. Ensign stated:

To apply what we learned and to come back and communicate so then we can help them [sailors] through our own experiences and learn. I guess that's one of the main things that people expect, and that we don't do enough . . . . There's always going to be a little bit of resistance whenever you try to implement something new. As long as it's discussed in the right manner to where you are opening up the conversations where there can be acceptance to the change, that's what is really going to dictate the success of it.

"Sometimes new information will seem incomprehensible" (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 70), but reflecting on the participants' responses, inclusion of new information in the workplace was attempted, regardless of subordinate or superior opinions. Academic success is not synonymous with workplace success applying the knowledge in the work place is a very important part of the adult learning process.

Anchor talked about specific U.S. Navy topics because this helped him relate to the sailors in his workplace. These topics were nonacademic, but he expressed being able to make a connection between the SEA and his workplace:

I believe when it comes to the Navy, you know, we did a heritage presentation and we got to hear a lot of stuff and learn about heritage that [we] didn't know the purpose behind. So, I brought a lot of that back [to the workplace] and I was able to apply that when I mentor sailors. One thing that I have applied was a brief on obesity; that was eye opening, and I still share those numbers with my sailors. During the sexual assault training, we were able to watch a documentary that spoke of sexual assault in the military.

He shifted from the specifics to add:

Also, there are going to be times where you are expected to get up in front of people and feel comfortable and look confident; you can't lead people until you can lead yourself. That gave me a lot of confidence that I knew that I was leading myself and doing the right things so I could be that role model. There's a running joke among people who have gone to the academy. When the people do public speaking events, occasionally you hear someone say, "Don't forget your transition sentence." We don't really use the transition sentences in the real life but we understand the purpose of the transition sentence when speaking professionally . . . . And, I'll never forget that personality test [speaking of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator] that they gave us at the SEA; they called us in and they gave us the brief, and they were actually calling people out and giving them scenarios and they could just tell from the test what type of person we were. It was probably the closest thing to a magic trick that I've seen. I've used some of that stuff in the work place.

Relating his experience to his workplace, Captain provided a specific example that he used periodically when interacting with his team:

I teach [a workplace] indoctrination and something that sticks with me from the academy all the time was when a senior military official [name redacted] came in and spoke to us and he said, “All the military around the world, you know why we are the best?” Take out the fact that we got the ability to kill the world three million times over, and all that other stuff. What makes us the best military? It was what he identified as the senior enlisted. That we can function at the same level as an officer in any other branch, that we are self-sufficient. He really gave it a perspective and it made me understand that we are so important to the success of the military. I use that to motivate my sailors today. I let them know that they’re not just there just to turn a wrench. Your ability to think, process, and trouble-shoot issues is what our number one asset is.

Not every participant suggested that he or she used the SEA when he or she returned to their workplace, Grog conveyed:

I really haven’t applied anything I learned from the academy to anything I did here at work. You know, [performance] evaluations are not written that way, but personal awards really aren’t written that way either. Well, being honest with you, there’s more parts that it doesn’t apply than where it does apply as far as my role. I am engaged more with sailors on a different level than what I learned at the SEA. Strategic planning and the defense of this country and the Navy’s power, those are things that on a ship level I don’t deal with. Those are things that a force and a fleet master chief will deal with and I’m just not at that level yet . . . . There are some parts of the SEA that I wish I would have had earlier in my career, and then there’s other parts of the SEA that I’m not going to remember. The strategic stuff was interesting, but I don’t think that with my job in the Navy that I could really apply that here.

This theme represented how graduates described applying their new knowledge in the workplace, as well as providing examples of what they could recall from the coursework. The application of learning can correlate to the knowledge or skills gained through formal education; however, its usefulness to the individual, and how he or she might apply it, is equally important (Knowles, 1990). To understand the meaning of these experiences, based on the individual's responses, their experiences will differ.

**Theme 4: Each participant experienced expectations from subordinates and superiors when returning to the workplace.** The final theme to emerge from coding the interviews described how each participant experienced expectations from subordinates and superiors when returning to the workplace. The interpretation of what the participants actually experienced went beyond the classroom. Anchor, Frigate and Hatch shared having an understanding of their workplace responsibilities, and its direct connection to their work experiences. This contributed to the participants increased confidence that positively affected their subordinates and superiors whom they vowed to educate and empower. Applying what was learned was challenging, but for Anchor, Frigate, and Hatch, it was a chance to learn in the workplace with a personalized approach.

Re-entering the workplace might cause a variety of emotions. Holding expectations can create constructive interpersonal relations between superiors and subordinates that contribute in creating an organizational atmosphere of trust and openness (Malinowski, 2013). After graduating, this is the expectation that Frigate stated as being challenging:

Yes, I believe that the Navy in general thinks that graduates of the SEA are, I don't know what's the right word to use, are better prepared, or are better leaders because a lot of

emphasis is put on the SEA. So people expected a better-prepared leader having graduated from the SEA.

The feeling of having conversations that bridges the gap between senior enlisted and senior officers was important during the conversation with Hatch. He contributed his personal experience by noting,

We could actually speak at a level where we understand each other while our missions are totally different. I think it helped me understand my subordinates and peers a lot better. It gave me reason to pause. I felt more even in my approach in dealing with folks.

Captain added a similar, but broadly addressed, experience:

Oh it was [a lot of] praise, I'm the stereotypical maintenance guy to the "T", but I got a lot of appreciation actually . . . . The leadership, I'm going to say my senior enlisted leadership; what they expected was for me to understand the decision making process a lot better than what I did before I went. That was probably the hugest thing. We can talk, we can talk at a level that I understand. I know why we have to do this and where we are going and the vision behind it. The subordinates, they didn't have any expectations, to them it's another Navy school, you finished it and that's it.

Upon returning to the workplace, Anchor and Ensign expressed having a sense of accomplishment; they praised the opportunity and experience of attending and completing the SEA. When it came to what the people in the workplace expected, Anchor experienced this:

I got mixed feelings from leadership about what they expected or me. You know, at times it was "where did you get this stuff from." I think the senior enlisted probably expected something [different], especially the ones that have not gone [to the SEA] yet. You know, I think in the old days you were going up to Newport, and you'd drink the Kool-Aid.

Then you come back and, you're going to think differently, and you are going to be all about Navy, and not about sailors. I think you can ask anybody these days that goes to academy; nobody comes back like that, like drinking the Kool-Aid. My subordinates, I think they just believe it's just another prerequisite once you promote, and I think that's what leadership thinks as well.

Ensign, however, reflecting on the engagement at his workplace stated, "There's resistance initially," whereas Grog felt there was an implication that he was "smarter than everybody else now."

Upon Grog's return, his peers expressed their expectations, which was surprising to him: They can see changes and that unless you sit down and talk to them, you are not going to alter their lives because of the senior enlisted academy. They [peers] don't see the value or are just flat out jealous that you got the opportunity [to attend the SEA].

Later in the interview, he added:

Because I had a little bit of the insight into myself, whenever I try to explain that to other people or try to use those tactics on other people. . . . it's kind of like, oh yeah, now you are just smarter than everybody 'cause you got some SEA in you.

Frigate, on the other hand, calmly expressed how he viewed change. Although he did not have any specifics to share, he stated:

Change is inherently hard . . . . Only a few people embrace change and so whenever you come in and you bring new ideas and you want them to embrace that concept . . . . It's almost like you are a used car salesman trying to sell them something that they don't want.

Dolphin's focus was on his passion of physical fitness. His comment surrounded bringing pertinent information for sailor's daily use:

There was some resistance.... [in the workplace]; we learned at the SEA. People just want to get into the workout so a lot of sailors don't understand [what] stretching and dynamic warm-up is. There was resistance to that. That's it.

Barnacle spoke about not having any influence on her superiors, unlike the influence she had with her peers and subordinates. Her thoughts were:

No one pushed back at all. I got back I went back to my workplace, and everybody kind of listened to what I had to say. So leadership, I'm not focused on what they think. What I'm saying is, don't focus on one little segment, let's think about being laser focused on to the true military problems.

Her experiences lend to the possibility of her military rank and hierarchal position. Like her, none of the other participants described their experiences negatively. However, Anchor and Hatch mentioned they had to speak positive about their experience to their subordinates and superiors because they did not want to discredit the school. This approach simply covers true experience of work-life after the SEA. These graduates were afraid to point out what they actually received and possibly use in the workplace among actual people. Furthermore, the perception of the graduate's abilities among subordinates and superiors, depending on the mission of the workplace, can be taxing. However, part of the dialogue with all participants was the trust to be strong leaders who possessed autonomy to lead within the workplace.

Knowles (1990) theorized that the learner's academic successes are heightened by their obligation to completing tasks. The perception of the graduate's abilities among subordinates, peers, and superiors, depending on the mission of the workplace, can be taxing. However, part of



the dialogue with all participants was the trust to be leaders who possessed autonomy to lead within the workplace.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the researcher described the analysis of the data and the presentation of results as they related to understanding the experiences of eight SEA graduates applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace. Although the interviews explored the graduates' experiences, they were able to provide descriptive explanations of their contributions to the learning environment, and of how applicable the course information from the SEA was to them personally and professionally. The interviews uncovered information related to adult learning and communities of practice. Additionally, the participants affirmed their feelings of the expectations placed on them from subordinates and superiors in the workplace upon their returned, which is captured in verbatim responses under the major themes presented.

The four themes that emerged were that each participant contributed to the learning environment; SEA provided a significant opportunity to build a networking and stronger senior enlisted community; participants were able to apply knowledge to their respective workplaces after completing SEA; and each participant experienced expectations from subordinates and superiors when he or she returned to the workplace. After analyzing the interviews, the researcher noticed that none of the participants had discussed faculty contribution to the learning environment during or after the course. Although the transfer of information to task does not have to be a formal undertaking, the participants did not discuss any SEA influences to aid the transferring of information for use in the workplace. In Chapter 5, the researcher will explore the findings that were drawn from the themes and will answer the research questions.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the researcher explored adult learning under the andragogical learning theory, which describes the education and learning of adults, placing an emphasis on the learning process and not the subject being taught. The purpose of this research was to explore how SEA graduates described their experiences of applying the SEA curriculum in the workplace. Again, learning is a known process to help students develop deeper understandings and awareness. Specifically, this study focused on the transformative learning of SELs who attended the SEA. In Chapter 2, transformative learning was described as a process of making meaning from personal experiences. In this study, transformative learning is the perspective of the student who reflects on his or her beliefs, values, assumptions, and expectations gathered over their lifetime (Mezirow, 2009). Furthermore, fundamental to a student's learning development, transformative learning involves the student gaining consciousness of those understandings, and then making a decision to negate them for a new, more informed, and justifiable understanding that guides improved actions (Gravett, 2006; Foote, 2015).

As described in the literature review, Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory was selected because of its specifics in addressing the needs of adult learners. During this study, the assimilation of individuals into groups and how they constructed knowledge to promote and enhance their learning was affirmed by Churcher et al. (2014) who remarked, "the ability to learn through dialogue and interaction with others is central to knowledge generation" (p. 35). Within the SEA learning environment, knowledge was co-constructed between students who shared stories as well as experiences from their workplace.

The uniqueness of personal experiences within the study added important information that was documented during the analysis because of the rich experiences of each participant's career path. This phenomenological qualitative study allowed SEA graduates to share reflexively their views, and provided the researcher with information to make meaning of their individual experiences within the conceptual framework that included adult learning, transformative learning, and communities of practice. By effectively creating a community of practice through the groups shared interest, the participants built relationships that fostered learning from one another. Discussing best practices and taking knowledge outside of the classroom then into the workplace, the social aspect of learning led to emerging contributions to the community through sharing resources to address concerns or problems.

### **Research Questions**

Using the phenomenological methodology, the following research questions were used to explore the participant's experiences:

1. How did SEA graduates describe using their personal and organizational experiences in the professional learning environment?
2. What is the meaning of the SEA graduates' experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?

Students who attended the SEA are technical experts in their respective career fields. During their career, as they advanced up the ranks and gained additional responsibility, they transitioned from following orders to accomplish specific technical or manual jobs to being the leader of a group of such workers. Learning to use this knowledge in the workplace is not automatic, and requires practice. These research questions focused on gathering information to

fully understand (a) the lived experiences of SEA students, (b) understanding their meaning, and (c) providing plausible insights about the studied phenomenon.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Shifting roles from workplace to academia and vice versa can be difficult, and is not an automatic transition. The succession of the role shifting should be assessed within the U.S. Navy. This cannot be a fragmented approach. The discovered meanings of the student's learning experiences ascribed to more than what was offered through formal education. Reviewing the data within Chapter 4, the three findings of this study were:

1. The formula for effective SEL development is a relationship between what is learned at the SEA and the unique professional and personal experiences of each student.
2. The graduates placed high emphasis on building a community through peer networking and applying what seemed useful in the workplace.
3. The peer feedback method of assessment and learning is not currently evaluated; therefore, its importance is not attributed to the SEA's learning outcome.

Again, this study addressed two research questions. From each participant's specific responses, the findings are as follows:

**Question 1: How did SEA graduates describe using their personal and organizational experiences in the professional learning environment?**

SEA graduates strongly felt that they were able to make connections during the distance-learning segment, giving them a sense of safety and community before beginning the resident course. This online connection was then blended into the traditional classroom environment, where the adult learners, who were traditionally different from the typical post-high-school, college student, came with other responsibilities and situations that could interfere with their

learning process. While in the learning environment, Knowles (1980) explains, adult learners experience being a resource for themselves and others. This experience included, but was not limited to, their positional roles and responsibilities within the workplace.

During the study, the graduates expressed feeling a range of emotions associated with sharing their professional and personal experiences with other students. When they began to build connections with each other, the stresses of the course shifted and a communal growth occurred, creating a comfortable learning environment. They expressed spending time after class discussing the coursework, which contributed to the connections that then interweaved into their learning process. At times, these connections challenged their experiential perspectives, but resulted in learning useful information. This learning was different from what occurred in the classroom; but what they experienced in the classroom carried into their after-hours interactions.

The participants also mentioned that their contributions to the learning environment were not motivated by academic rewards, they felt personally that their peers supported them, and that they were comfortable with sharing their individuality. The correlation between learning and leadership for military students was present in their participation. Although academic challenges existed, the students unanimously ascribed to their educational experiences as sharing the desire to include their professional and personal experiences in the classroom.

An effective SEL professional development program begins with structuring a relationship between what is learned at the SEA combined with the unique professional and personal experiences of the persons involved. Transformative leadership calls for “a change in the vision and commitment of leaders, it also emphasizes the need for the leaders to follow a different set of institutional processes and behavior” (Jahan, 1999, p. 4). The students were able to connect their prior knowledge and perspectives and incorporate new outlooks through others

shared experiences. According to Jarvis (1987), relating our own experiences to a situation will present a clearer meaning; therefore, nothing can substitute for experience. The use of their personal and organizational experiences as an asset provided opportunities for connecting academics to the workplace.

**Question 2: What is the meaning of the SEA graduates' experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?**

Gravett (2006) stated, "If we fail to provide learners with the opportunity to explore their own ideas and see where they fall short, we are likely to leave their beliefs untouched, and simply give them the language to cover them" (p. 263). An aspect of the transformative learning process is learning how relationships may improve worldviews, which can change rooted preconceptions. Hence, the return on investment for the SEA is unknown once graduates return to their individual workplace. During the interviews, the participants felt the leadership and active communication topics were useful in their workplace. Having the desire to apply these topics into the workplace, the participants experienced challenges with using new techniques and blending them with workplace relevance.

The participants spoke openly about their afterhours discussions where they became aware of, and shared, their feelings and beliefs concerning returning to their workplace. It opened them up to revising previous notions for integration of newly appropriated information into future practice. Learning that is considered effective and occurs in the classroom where students sit and receive information in the form of transmission is a common conjecture (Cercone, 2008). The participants spoke of disassociation while being teacher-led for all coursework. These students expressed an interest in their classroom learning, and indicated they

did not have the opportunity to explore taking responsibility for the new knowledge once they were back in the workplace.

Blondy (2007) stated, “Learning is an active process during which time the learner developed new ideas based upon knowledge already attained” (p. 117). According to Moustaka’s (1994) phenomenology, and from the interview results, all participants repeated a desire for learning how to transfer information to the workplace. However, the participants believed that these skills were misplaced within the curriculum, which was designed so that the students needed to identify them on their own. According to Ascough (2011), to fill the void, networking and other peer interactions are constructed and used via separate learning communities to support the learning progress, which can ignite interest for future use. Therefore, the students were left to construct these learning communities for themselves.

### **Implications**

According to Donaldson (2008), individuals do not recognize the significance of experiential learning, and, when they do, it takes a while. Reviewing the literature proved useful in explaining how adult students experience learning. Using the framework of the adult learning, transformative learning, and communities of practice theories, as they contributed to the context of enlisted military education, the researcher presented the results of this research. The findings from this study suggest several potential opportunities to improve senior enlisted development at the SEA by using feedback from senior enlisted sailors who take learning to the workplace; therefore, the following recommendations are made.

First, consider social and emotional intelligence, as well as, feedback and personal reflection as being important to learning (Donaldson, 2008). The participant’s discussion of using experience-centric stories and individual perceptions was helpful in extending learning

beyond the classroom. The connection between students holds significance in the learning environment. It is perhaps telling that the participants did not mention student–faculty connections as part of their experiences although the faculty was present during the learning experience.

Seldom did the participants mention the SEA as being challenging, although they had heard stories from previous students who cited some academic challenges. The graduates highlighted the amount of peer interaction that they received within study groups and class events as being significant to their learning experience, and did not mention faculty interaction as being significant to their learning experience. This indicates the need for an assessment to capture individual learning styles, and to understand each person’s abilities, which requires a sharper awareness of the complexities of adult learning (Van der Mescht, 2004). Additionally, the assessment might identify avenues to operationalize newly acquired learning, and to improve understanding of possible disconnections that senior enlisted sailors might have in their transition back into the workplace.

Second, Knowles (1968) explained that each learner possesses (a) self-concept, (b) previous learning experience, (c) the readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) motivation to learn. Within each adult learner, the magnitude of these traits differs; therefore, learning challenges exist. The traits of adult learners, experiences of others in the learning environment, and the desire to improve personally or professionally are a part of the adult learning journey in which the learner needs a supportive environment in which learning is fostered as an interactive process.

Knowles (1984) and Mezirow (2009) valued using the community to enhance learning. These communities include people who engage in collective learning by sharing information of a



common interest through multiple venues (Wenger, 1998). The interviewed SEA participants felt that the support of all students motivated them to do their best. Their responses indicated that reciprocal relationships existed. Much of what adults learn and how they learn it is dependent on and is inseparable from group interactions and relationships. The interviewed SEA participants shared a common passion for learning, and desired to create a lifetime learning community. This finding suggests that, by dedicating time within the course for students to work together, the SEA could better achieve its goal of improving student learning. Students can move beyond their singular classroom and blend with other classes; this design is another technique through which students might learn more by networking with others.

A third finding in the study was a need to include a concluding brief for each topic. This brief would include how to use the new knowledge in the workplace. With a large population of students of differing organizational backgrounds, the participants enter the environment with uncertainty. Understanding the angst, and managing student expectations, would alleviate the current experience of blindly navigating through the SEA, and then returning to the workplace without a clear understanding of how to use the new knowledge. Using new knowledge gained from the SEA should be an explicit part of the curriculum learning outcomes (Chun, 2012).

Fourth and finally, adult learners have the ability to transfer learning to a task, but other influences might cloud their ability to notice, recognize, and create meaning from a problem and to connect it reflectively to the academic course for effective use. However, the participants found that their true academic achievement connects to life after the SEA. Their community was built through relationships while collectively learning and sharing interests (Wenger, 1998). The participants pointed out that, as part of their transition back to the workplace, the importance of building a community and creating peer connections was directly associated with learning, and

could contribute to workplace success. Students not only need to feel part of a community while at the SEA, but also need to understand the importance of the community of practice in the workplace. Having considered the above implications, the researcher summarizes recommendations for action in the following section.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Promoting change is an important aspect of learning, and capitalizing on the adult learners' feedback makes the learning experience meaningful. This implication of promoting change is important. The use of key words within learning objectives, such as understand or grasp, are insufficient for students to be engaged in transferring learning to the workplace (Ascough, 2011). Reflecting on the experiences of the participants, the literature, and this study's findings, the researcher contributes to the advancement of understanding adult learners within the military learning environment. Listed below are recommendations to bridge the gap with taking learning to workplace.

1. Cultivate an environment that is conducive to learning with an emphasis on understanding how adults learn, while facilitating the use of peer learning practices. Each student enters the SEA's learning environment with unique strengths and weaknesses that distinguishes them apart from one another (Topping, 2009). They are equipped with personal and organizational experiences that can be leveraged during the course of instruction. Each senior enlisted leader enters the SEA learning environment with a depth of exclusive experiences and expectations that adds to the complexity of learning (Knowles, 1990).

Additionally, as an integral part of adult learning, feedback can be presented as more than a monologue for learners with the ability to self-assess, and then take

- corrective action to improve their work. Peer feedback, on the other hand, being a collaborative process, is essential. Piaget (1976) describes the importance of capitalizing on the social exchanges with students by using relationships built on personal experiences to supplement formal learning practices. This can occur during classes as well as the student's after-hours interactions. This type of learning is often overlooked in higher education; the learning journey that includes effective use of peers is complementary to students, and especially those with subject-matter expertise (Topping, 2009). Lastly, in relation to peer feedback, by empowering students to strengthen their beliefs, assumptions, and understandings, they will challenge themselves by having a non-biased view of others' beliefs, making the learning process transformative.
2. As students satisfy all academic requirements and prepare to graduate from the SEA, facilitating a student reorientation course prior to returning to the workplace would be beneficial. The SEA has the potential of bridging relevant curriculum information and adjusting the learning outcomes to match workplace expectations. As Knowles (1990) mentioned in his assumptions, adults have the willingness to learn and are self-directed. If there was another goal to be satisfied, and they were responsible to satisfy the goal, that task would be completed. This concept from Knowles (1990) considers the adult learners' mode of thinking, and their ability to construct and retain knowledge to meet their needs. This session could increase self-efficacy of the transitioning student by empowering them with additional resources that can assist them away from the SEA.

3. Upon returning to the workplace, creating a post-SEA's assessment could be used to learn how graduates are perceived by their subordinates, peers, and superiors after completing the SEA. This narrative-style assessment might be conducted after approximating a length of time conducive to adequate follow-up for the organization, but after the graduate is reintegrated and reengaged within the workplace. It will be important to incorporate structures and processes to assess their use of the course material, by observing their contributions with an understanding of the strategies, simulations, and role playing they experienced at the SEA. Their new learning can play a vital role in the success of the workplace. In the interests of continuing with this workplace success, the graduates' use of conscious reflection and relevant assumptions can benefit their workplace by igniting necessary change (Gravett, 2006). Conceptually, this can lead into a leadership development model that provides feedback opportunities to all personnel in their workplace routines.
4. After the graduate is in workplace for 12 months, the SEA staff should continue with the post-SEA assessment, and include providing relevant tools and updates made to each lesson being facilitated at the SEA. As Fok (2010) mentions, when students are successful in their workplace, they will likely continue to use what they've learned in that environment. Therefore, continued feedback, which is a collaborative process (Liu and Carless, 2006) is necessary for the graduate's professional development. As graduates' are empowered to recognize and create meaningful solutions to problems, they may connect their abilities to the academic coursework or overall learning experience. (Russell, 2006)

The results of this research corroborate the importance of transformative learning as a process which will lead to affecting organizational change that will benefit the adult learner, the SEA, the workplace, and the U.S. Navy. Learning styles are an important factor for the student and teacher. Individual preferences and approaches to learning are evident and, within a complex field, an understanding of how they relate to differences of how people think, solve problems, and interact. In all, not one learning model can satisfy all learners.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

While finalizing this phenomenological study filled with rich personal examples, both research questions were answered, and an understanding of SELs' learning preferences were brought to light. If the supposition is that learning automatically transfers to the workplace, it is false to assume that all students can recognize, on their own, what is useful to fit their individual workplace needs. Ascough (2011) noted, "Students want a clear idea of the return on investment of a given activity" (p. 46). Teaching transference of classroom learning and skills is one approach to help students gain the return on investment by providing insight on how to use course materials.

An acknowledgment that other types of learning exist and are necessary in education could form an essential change in the approach to learning at SEA. Learners can be encouraged to capitalize on the experiences of others, by identifying the diversity and understandings of other students and, at times, faculty. Informal learning is a natural accompaniment of everyday life. This is typically invisible to standard learning practices because it cannot be assessed or tracked. Specifically, informal learning contributes to stimulating positive connections and fostering incidental learning.

Informal learning initiatives parallel formal learning strategies, but require student reflection on formal curriculum and learning outside the classroom. Military members are trained to task; little emphasis is placed on learning through other techniques. Further qualitative studies should include the effects of informal learning techniques in a military learning environment. This recommendation would add to the existing adult learning body of knowledge. Furthermore, the results would provide valuable insight into the skills and characteristics of the educators who would benefit from future study.

### **Summary**

The learning community concept is important for the adult learners who participated in this study. Academic achievement, test scores, and graduation rates will always be used to measure the success or failure of an education institution. Resources are expended to provide the best curriculum and assessment strategies; however, little attention is given to the social and emotional needs of the students, and the teachers who educate them. In this study, the researcher clarified that, when resources are focused on the social–emotional needs of students as they transition from the SEA to the workplace, they feel a greater connection to the institution and their academic achievement. If the SEA added more social–emotional learning, the importance of student–teacher relationships and their impact on student engagement and motivation might improve.

Furthermore, in this study, the researcher demonstrated how the perception of effectiveness when making personal connections between students increased their emotional satisfaction of connecting with students. SEA transitions programs are one such opportunity that can employ teachers and students to connect authentically through the curriculum. The practices that support and strengthen student teacher relationships must be explicit for these programs to

be successful. The benefits of transition programs are twofold. First, these programs support student engagement, achievement, and their ability to navigate through the course and beyond, which is the academic goal of higher education. Secondly, as the research shows, facilitators who have the opportunity to build positive relationships with their students and have an emotional connection to their students are more effective, and if the goal for students is to build their social–emotional skills to transition successfully into the workplace, then the SEA must simulate experiences and provide opportunities to practice those skills.

In closing, VanVactor (2011) noted, “Effective transitions . . . do not happen accidentally” (p. 202), understanding how people learn can propel scholarship and practice simultaneously. Progress in scholarly research of transitioning learning to workplace remains an integral part of bridging the gap within adult learning. The meanings that students ascribe to their educational experiences must be used as a reflexive addition to understanding the learning process. Teachers and students alike must persevere through these difficulties in making a difference in adult learning. The results of this phenomenological study provided a perspective for addressing this gap, and committing, with determination, to develop a strong and useful strategy that leads to attainment of the goal. In short, “If the knowledge gained is not put into use, then the search for knowledge has been time wasted” (Landis & Landis, 2013, p. 31).

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## APPENDIX A:

## REQUEST TO PARTICIPATE LETTER

Dear Colleague,

Hello. My name is Emiel Barrett. I am a doctoral candidate at The University of New England, and am seeking volunteers who would like to assist me in conducting research for my doctoral dissertation. You would be assisting in the research of exploring how Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) graduates describe their experience of applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace.

Criteria for participation are 1) you must be: within 12 months' postgraduation, 2) serving in the military pay grade of E9, 3) 12 years or more time in service and 4) be a SEA graduate. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an individual interview.

The interview should take between 30 to 45 minutes of your time. Participant's names, location, and the information gained from the interviews will be completely confidential and anonymous. During the interview, I will ask you to tell me about the personal and professional experiences you brought to the SEA, and how those experiences shaped your learning. Additionally, I will ask you to describe your experiences of applying what you've learned back into the workplace. In other words, I want to hear stories from your perspective about learning in your Navy life that shaped you as a leader.

The interviews will be conducted in from my home office, and I would ask that you be in a quiet place during the interview. Each interview will be voice recorded, in addition to notes taken. Participation is entirely voluntary. Also, please be aware that you are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time; even after we start the interview.

If you are interested and able to assist me with my research, please respond to this email with your preferred contact information so that we can schedule your interview.

If you have any questions or comments about this research, you can contact either me or any of the following:

- Principal Investigator, Dr. George "Bud" Baker, (401) 841-2344, [george.baker@usnwc.edu](mailto:george.baker@usnwc.edu)
- Rachel Kasperek, Director of Research Integrity, (207) 602-2244, [rkasperek@une.edu](mailto:rkasperek@une.edu)
- Co-Principal Investigator, Dr. Carol Holmquist, (804) 305-5570, [cholmquist@une.edu](mailto:cholmquist@une.edu)
- Navy Postgraduate School, Dr. Larry Shattuck, (831) 656-2473, [lgshattu@nps.edu](mailto:lgshattu@nps.edu)

Thank you for your time and consideration to this request.

Emiel Barrett, 504-296-1797, [ebarrett2@une.edu](mailto:ebarrett2@une.edu)

## APPENDIX B

## RESEARCH/INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**Research Question #1:**

*How did Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) graduates describe their personal and organizational experiences as associated in their professional learning experience?*

**Introduction questions:**

- Please tell me about your Navy background: How many years of service do you have?
- What is your rating (career field), and can you tell me a little about what that means?
- How long have you been an E9 (Master Chief)?
- When did you attend the SEA?

**Warm up:** Think back about when you were promoted to Master Chief, please describe that experience.

**Interview Questions:**

1. Please describe what it means to be a Master Chief in your career field; what roles and responsibilities do you have.
2. As a Master Chief, you're at the top of enlisted leadership; what was it that drew your interest into attending the SEA (SEA)?
  - [if not addressed in previous response] Why did you apply to attend?
3. When you learned of your acceptance to attend the SEA, what were your thoughts of what you could contribute to the overall experience? (Personal, professional, or both)
4. How did you prepare for SEA attendance?
5. When you arrived and were situated at the SEA, discuss what previous personal and/or professional experiences were brought to the learning environment (classroom).
  - What did you feel about your experience at the SEA?
6. [If not addressed in previous responses] Do you know of anyone who attended the SEA? If so, how would you describe their experiences if compared with yours?

**Research Question #2**

*What is the meaning of the SEA graduates experiences of applying the SEA coursework to their workplace?*

**Warm up:** Now that you've graduated from the SEA, what feelings did you have about going back to your command (workplace)?

**Interview Questions:**

7. What do you think your leadership, and subordinates expect from you now that you've graduated from the SEA?
  - What was that first conversation like? Did someone ask "how was it"? If so, how did you respond?
8. Are there any topics facilitated at the SEA that you would describe as applicable to improving your leadership skills? If so, which one(s)? If none, why?
9. Tell me a story about the first time you used what you learned at the SEA in your workplace?
  - Have you used any of what you described in your personal life?
10. As you reflect back on the topics facilitated, in your current role as a Master Chief, tell me about the applicability of what you learned at the SEA.
11. [only ask if coursework was applied to the workplace] Talk to me about any resistance from leadership and/or subordinates when taking a new approach to leading Sailors? How about any praise?
12. Is there anything else you would like to add concerning your experience at the SEA?

## APPENDIX C

## INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW SCRIPTS

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. As mentioned earlier, I am in the final phase of my doctoral studies at the University of New England. My role here is as a student at the University of New England. I am here to gather stories how Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) graduates describe their experience of applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace.

First, I want to emphasize that all participants in this study will remain anonymous, and that your participation is completely voluntary. If you don't mind, I would like to review these consent forms with you before we begin.

[Review and sign UNE & NWC Consent Forms]

Thank you. I have two more administrative items to discuss before we begin. With your permission, I would like to turn on the recording device during this session, so I can capture your exact words, and to be able to focus on our conversation. As a reminder, you have the right to refuse to answer any question asked. Additionally, I will have our interview transcribed and will e-mail you that transcription for your review, comments, or additional insight. Is that OK?

Great! Let's begin.

## APPENDIX D

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Emiel Barrett, Doctoral Candidate**  
**Dr. Carol Holmquist, Principal Investigator**  
**Dr. George Baker, NWC Advisor**

**Introduction.** You are invited to participate in a research study entitled *A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Senior Enlisted Academy Graduates*. This research is in collaboration with the naval War College (NWC). The purpose of the research is to explore how Senior Enlisted Academy (SEA) graduates describe their experience of applying the SEA curriculum in their workplace.

**Procedures.** The student researcher will conduct two-rounds of interviews for 8–10 participants. The first round may inform what information is necessary for the study, and the possibility of a second interview may constitute any additional clarification needed that was not captured from the first interview.

The interview should take between 30 to 45 minutes of your time. All names, location, and the information gained from the interviews will be completely confidential and anonymous. During the interview, I will ask about the personal and professional experiences you brought to the SEA, and how those experiences shaped your learning. Additionally, I will ask you to describe your experiences of applying what you've learned back into the workplace. In other words, I want to hear stories from your perspective about learning in your Navy life that shaped you as a leader.

Each interview that was audio-recorded will be transcribed verbatim, to include utterances. This allows me to be sensitive to the undertones of language. After completing the analysis, I will ask each participant to validate the data for accuracy, and validate my interpretation of the data collected.

**Location.** The interview will take place, via telephone, in my home office.

**Cost.** There is no cost to participate in this research study.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study.** Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you choose to participate, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw from the study. You will not be penalized in any way or lose any benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled if you choose not to participate in this study or to withdraw. The alternative to participating in the research is not to participate in the research.

**Potential Risks and Discomforts.** There is a minimal risk of breach of confidentiality in this study. Although there is a possibility that interview data and related audio recordings being lost or stolen, this would result in little risk based on the use of pseudonyms during interviews. In the

unlikely event that study data are lost or stolen, the student researcher will immediately notify you.

**Anticipated Benefits.** You will not directly benefit from your participation in this research. However, participants may feel some benefit from knowing their participation in this study may lead a program that could help others who later attend the Navy SEA (SEA).

**Compensation for Participation.** No tangible compensation will be given.

**Confidentiality & Privacy Act.** Any information that is obtained during this study will be kept confidential to the full extent permitted by law. All efforts, within reason, will be made to keep your personal information in your research record confidential but total confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Real names will not be used in the notes taken during the interviews. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym (e.g. Sailor honor) that only the researcher knows. That pseudonym will be used throughout the interview to ensure confidentiality and protect the identity of the participant.

Interviews will be audio-recorded, and transcribed by rev.com following industry standards regarding security of data. A copy of the interviews, transcriptions, and coding will be stored on the student researcher's .mil e-mail account; access to the computer is password protected. In addition, a back-up copy of this data will be saved on the student researchers .mil storage drive. Participant's identity will be protected by using pseudonyms in the data.

All paper documents (e.g., consent forms, interview notes, coding notes, and research-related documents, master list of names, etc.) will be stored with the researcher in a locked file cabinet/safe until they can be digitized. Once digitized, all paper documents will be destroyed. All research material (e.g., interview notes, transcriptions, and coding) will be stored on the student researcher's .mil e-mail account; access to the computer is password protected. In addition, a back-up copy of this data will be saved on the student researchers .mil storage drive. Afterwards, per Department of the Navy requirements, all data, research notes, and consent forms will be transferred to the Naval War College on a CD, kept in secure storage for 10 years, and then forwarded to a Federal Record Center per SECNAVINST M 5210.1.

I consent to participate in this research study.

I do not consent to participate in this research study.

I consent to be audio-recorded for this research study.

I do not consent to be audio-recorded for this research study.

**Points of Contact.** If you have any questions or comments about the research, or you experience an injury or have questions about any discomforts that you experience while taking part in this study please contact:



1. Student researcher, Emiel Barrett, at (504) 296-1797, [ebarrett2@une.edu](mailto:ebarrett2@une.edu)
2. Principal Investigator, Dr. George “Bud” Baker, 401-841-2344, [george.baker@usnwc.edu](mailto:george.baker@usnwc.edu)

Questions about your rights as a research subject or any other concerns may be addressed to the Navy Postgraduate School, Dr. Larry Shattuck, (831) 656-2473, [lgshattu@nps.edu](mailto:lgshattu@nps.edu).

**Statement of Consent.** I have read the information provided above. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and all the questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been provided a copy of this form for my records and I agree to participate in this study. I understand that by agreeing to participate in this research and signing this form, I do not waive any of my legal rights.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix E

## Member checks template/post interview follow-up e-mail

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences by participating in this interview with me on (*date*). As discussed, I am following up with this e-mail so you can review the transcription of the interview for accuracy (please see attached). Please feel free edit the transcription as necessary, as well as to offer any additional thoughts, ideas, or reflections you may have had since our telephone interview.

When finished, please reply to this email even if you have nothing to report. Or, if you prefer, you can contact me at (504) 296-1797. Thank you again for your valuable time, and for your willingness to improve unselfishly the leaders of our Navy, and the Senior Enlisted Academy.

Sincerely,

Emiel Barrett

## Appendix F

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**ACCESS AND USE:** My Submission, or portions thereof, will be maintained in an open access online digital environment via DUNE: DigitalUNE. The Submission, irrespective of its access level, is intended for educational purposes only. Signing this document neither endorses nor authorizes the commercial use of my Submission in DUNE: DigitalUNE by UNE or any other person or organization, but I acknowledge that UNE will not and cannot control the use of my Submission by others. Liability for any copyright infringement of my Submission, downloaded from DUNE: DigitalUNE, will fall solely upon the infringing user, and responsibility for enforcing my copyright and other rights in and to my Submission falls solely on me. I agree that UNE may, without changing the content, convert my Submission to any medium or format necessary for the purpose of long-term preservation, and may also keep more than one copy of my Submission for preservation purposes.

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Reviewed and agreed to via email as indicated above.