Abstract

Home Group Bible Studies, Fellowship Groups, or Home Cells, to name a few, provide an opportunity for worshipping Christians to meet on a frequent basis for varied reasons but most often to study and learn from the Bible. The existing adult education literature on this international and local practice is scant. This dissertation explores a case of nonformal learning by adults in a Johannesburg-based Methodist home group bible study.

The theoretical lenses used to explore the learning of six adults are Lave and Wenger's (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) Community of Practice theory, and Dirkx (Dirkx, 2000, 2001; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006), English (English, 2000; English & Gillen, 2000) and Tisdell's (Tisdell, 1999, 2008) Holistic Learning theories. Dirkx's (2001) theory of holistic learning is situated as a critique of Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory. The research is conducted in the interpretive paradigm. Case study methodology is used to richly describe the learning and change in three couples within a home group bible study in the context of the home church and Methodism more generally.

Data collection methods include observations of home group bible study sessions, semi-structured interviews, programme notes from the bible study programme followed, and journals written by five of the six participants.

The analysis of the data takes as its point of departure the voices of the participants, and the description and history of the home group. This study provides opportunity to theorise the learning and changes experienced by the members of this nonformal adult education enterprise, and to contribute to existing literature. Whilst the bible study home group as a whole and the case study participants in particular foreground their learning as rational, cognitive and academic, this study reveals the multidimensionality of their learning. The most significant learning in action is situated within the affective learning domain. Extrarational ways of knowing, intuition and feelings exist in their own right and lead to holistic learning.

Declaration

I, Vivienne Susan Spooner, declare that

(i) The research reported in this thesis, except where otherwise indicated, is my original work.

(ii) This thesis has not been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.

(iii) This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons.

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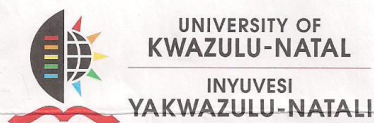
Signed:

Vivienne Susan Spooner
September 2012

As the candidate's Supervisor I agree to the submission of this thesis.
Signed:

Dr Vaughn John
September 2012

Ethical Clearance

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Dear Mrs Spooner

PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/0849/011M
PROJECT TITLE: Exploring adult learning in a bible study home group: A case study
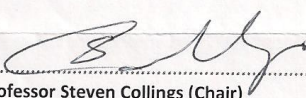
In response to your application dated 7 September 2011, the Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has considered the abovementioned application and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL.**

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.
PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years.

I take this opportunity of wishing you everything of the best with your study.

Yours faithfully

....

Professor Steven Collings (Chair)
HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc. Supervisor: Dr V John
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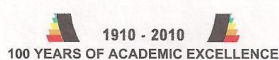
Founding Campuses: Edgewood   Howard College   Medical School   Pietermaritzburg   Westville

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Dave, my long-suffering husband who, more than once, was heard to mutter something about "winters of discontent". As in all I do I know that I have your whole-hearted and generous support.

Those many people who asked how my research was progressing and provided the catalyst for renewed efforts. I am indebted. To Rags thank you for your support and interest. To Magdel and Beulah in the GIBS (Gordon Institute of Business Science) Information Centre my gratitude for helping source books and for granting me access to the databases.

My immediate family, wider family and circle of friends who may not have understood the reasons for embarking on this journey, but who nevertheless supported Dave and me through it all.

Abbreviations

AIDS   Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

DVD   Digital video disc

HIV   Human immunodeficiency virus

IT   Information technology

MCSA   Methodist Church of Southern Africa

NGO   Non-governmental organisation

OECD   Organization for economic co-operation and development

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Chapter 1   Focus and Purpose of Study

Background

In 2010, after many years of abstinence, I participated in a home group bible study, and then also accepted a second invitation to join another home group. One home group bible study took place in my church and was led by the resident minister while the other was a group of only white women from another denomination. In the church home group I was at ease with the theology of the bible study. The participants, older than me, were mostly retired and often reflected on their life experiences during the bible study. The group met on a Tuesday afternoon for about an hour and a half in the church lounge. In the second bible study we met in someone's home on a Wednesday afternoon for two hours, most of the participants were my age and in a similar life stage to me. The latter group was led by two of the members within the group, and the bible study followed programmes recommended by the church, which often highlighted how their theology differed from my understanding. Taylor defines a frame of reference as "structures of assumptions and expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs and actions" (Taylor, 2008, p. 5). There were times when the ensuing revisions of my frame of reference in the second bible study led to high levels of frustration, and made me consider how I dealt with the uncertainty and ambiguity resulting from my participation in these contrasting home group bible studies.

Taylor goes on to say that paradigmatic shifts occur as frames of reference are revised concomitantly with reflections on experience. My personal reflections resulted in my seeing these events and frustrations as occasions of authentic adult learning with perhaps some evidence of perspective transformations for me and others. However, I was left with many unanswered questions about what exactly goes on in a bible study, especially with regard to how we as adults learn in this non-formal context. Ostensibly this is a religious practice but with what purpose in mind?

Each home group bible study provides a unique learning context for many adults. The motivations for participation in bible study are diverse and many, ranging from faith-based weight loss programmes (Kim, et al., 2008) to enabling the building of interpersonal relations through learning how to forgive (Wuthnow, 2000). I assume that included amongst these must be an element of 'not knowing something or not knowing enough' (gaps or shallowness) about the message of the bible, that is, constructing

one's own meaning from biblical text, and about personal spiritual growth and its relatedness to living in the world.

Another purpose for attending home group bible study was highlighted in my church last year. In a drive to get more congregants involved in bible study, several participants from different bible study home groups were invited to make comment in church about their home group bible study experiences. Six people from different groups gave their feedback, and overwhelmingly spoke of a sense of belonging in community and of building relationships. Interestingly for me, gaining a deeper understanding of the bible was mentioned only in passing.

Bible study is widely practiced geographically, demographically and across socio-economic groups and denominations, both in South Africa and globally, as evidenced by an internet search. Entering search terms home group bible study yields approximately 9,5 million results. The links to websites include online bible study, information about how to conduct bible study in small groups, resources to use in bible study, and testimonies from advocates of small group bible study. Adding a town name or region to the search terms gives several contact details for home groups in the area. Despite the global extent and reach of small group bible studies, each home group is unique because of its socioeconomic and political context, purpose of study, theology and religious practices of the host church.

There is a surprising silence in adult education academic literature about learning through small group bible studies (Longacre, 2009), and nothing in the South African context. Possibly the lack of literature and concentration on home group bible study practice may be a consequence of the focus on work-related education and training within a market-driven political economy. According to Mayo (1997, p. 21), there is a failure

> to give adequate recognition to the contribution of adult education and training in the community in social terms, whether in terms of involving educationally disadvantaged participants, prolonging the active involvement and participation of the elderly, or promoting active citizenship and democracy more generally. These types of goals have been key to alternative approaches to development, for social and political goals, as well as for economic goals. In the market-led scenario, however, they tend to be effectively marginalised.

In this research I explore learning by three adult couples engaged in one home group bible study. Through constructing a rich and reflective description I develop a deeper understanding of this learning in relation to relevant theory. The purpose of the study is to generate knowledge about adult learning in the non-formal context of home group bible study and thus to address a gap in the literature, both internationally and in South Africa.

Purpose of study

This intensive and lively description of the context, purpose and practice of adult learning through a case study of three couples participating in one home group bible study explores the motivations to participate in bible study, the nature and process of learning as a consequence of this participation, and how this learning relates to personal and interpersonal development and responds to societal needs, within the milieu of a particular denomination. The host church, its theology and religious practice, is also richly described in order to gain an understanding of the context of this bible study group and how such learning is situated.

Research questions

- What motivates participation in bible study?
- What are the nature and process of learning which occurs in bible study?
- How does learning in bible study relate to personal development, family life, work life and societal needs?

Significance of study

"The whole person is made up of mind, body and spirit. Rarely, however, are the body and spirit taken into account when we talk about learning. Our Western heritage has defined learning as a mental process that takes place in the mind" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 189). A new frontier in adult education is opening: that of somatic or embodied learning. Somatic learning is inherently linked to experiential learning in the sense that learning often happens in or through the experience. As is the case with spiritual and narrative knowing, embodied learning is connected to adult learning through meaning-making. In the next paragraphs I look at Swartz's article that links wisdom, neurology and the spiritual.

Swartz (2011) writes that long before humankind was able to codify and reify their understanding of the world, it knew the world through bodily prehension. They experienced themselves through paradoxical consciousness, "a diffuse peripheral awareness that accepts the world as it presents itself … [which] is consistent with preconscious, unlanguaged embodied knowing as described by embodied cognitive science" (Swartz, 2011, p. 16). Whilst "paradoxical consciousness was the norm, the Sacred existed within the natural world" but, as the conscious mind developed, later generations saw the Sacred outside and above their natural world (Swartz, 2011, p. 16). Reconnection to the Sacred took place through religious and mystical experiences.

Recent writings about the conscious mind from a neurological standpoint show that, from an evolutionary perspective, humankind developed an awareness of themselves as separate from each other and from the environment. Selective pressure from increasing population size resulted in a nervous system that promoted social connections, the neural basis of today's human brain. This social brain is now seen as an organ of wisdom. Defining wisdom from a neurological viewpoint may be either described as a unique psychological trait or transcendent, "the possible outcome of following a prescribed spiritual path that facilitates emotional maturity" (Swartz, 2011, p. 17). In a review of research that looked to identify the correlation between neural and cognitive characteristics of spiritual experiences, despite cultural differences, a common specific neural pathway was found. Meeks and Jeste's model (as cited in Swartz, 2011, p. 18) linking neuroscience to components of wisdom, emphasises brain function in the way that the '"nervous system flows throughout the body, and the embodied mind arises from its integrated functioning".

Research into adult learning that focuses on mind, body and soul is new, and moves away from the commonly held notion that all learning has to be cognitive, rational and of the mind. This study examines meaning-making through spirituality, as it is situated in the practice of home group bible study. Furthermore, existing literature on spirituality does not often view it through an adult education theoretical lens. Most academic articles on spirituality are seen in theological or religious practice paradigms.

There is also a scarcity in published research on the practice of bible studies. A search on the 'Academic Search Premier' database looking for articles with bible study in the title yielded 112 articles. Most of these articles have a theological focus i.e. how to conduct a bible study; or are exegetical study notes; or report research on the political

context of bible study; or are articles on bible study in a given context, such as prison-based bible study or that take place in certain denominations outside of the United States. Bible study is widely practiced in South Africa and internationally, and has a long history, but there is little in the literature about what is known concerning how adults learn in this practice. There is little about adult learning in bible study in the South African context.

Theoretical framework

This research draws on the works of Lave and Wenger's Community of Practice theory (1991). As a variant of Mezirow's (1995, 2000b) Transformative Learning theory, Dirkx (1997, 2000, 2001; Dirkx, et al., 2006), English (2000) and Tisdell's (1999, 2008) Holistic Learning theory is also drawn on. All these theories are based on the psychological explanations of learning through the process of social constructivism.

In terms of learning theory, adult education has three key streams. The roots of adult education theories lie in the soil of psychology, where learning as an individual was first explored. Theories that emerged from this field included behaviourism, cognitivism, cognitive constructivism and developmental psychology. Later on, theories on learning as a social endeavour and in interaction with others were established which include social participation, social constructivism, sociocultural psychology, activity theory and situated cognition theories. Community of practice has emerged from this stream.

Emerging from the psychological perspective a plethora of adult learning theories developed. Because adult learning is unique, complex and situated, there are often several means of understanding how a particular adult learns in a particular context. However, theories may be coalesced around the following themes: emancipatory learning (Freire, 1972); transformative learning (Brookfield, 1997; Cranton, 1994, 2006; Habermas, 1984; Jarvis, 1995; Mezirow, 1995; Taylor, 2008); experiential learning (Dewey, 1966; Kolb, 1984; Lave and Wenger,1991; Lewin, 1958; Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998, 2000); and more recently holistic learning (Cranton, 2006; Dirkx, 1997, 2000, 2001; English, 2000; Taylor, 2001, 2007; Tisdell, 1999, 2008).

More recently, with the ability to examine how the brain works through the emerging field of neurology, more attention is being focused on the role of emotions and soul in learning. This is the work of Dirkx and others, who examine the affective and holistic

dimensions of learning (Cranton, 2006; Kasl & Elias, 2000; Merriam, et al., 2007). Griffin also positions holistic learning alongside the role of interrelationships with others, that is, the social dimension of learning (Cranton, 2006). This study of a bible study home group presents the opportunity to examine the part played by the soul and emotion in learning, and how learning may also happen in groups through the development of relationships. The focus of learning is on meaning-making through the affective rather than cognitive dimension.

Methodology chosen

Alvesson and Sköldberg (cited by Henning, van Rensburg, & Smit, 2004, p. 31) argue

> … that the research questions, the way the researcher perceives the world and knowledge (her ontological and epistemological position), influences *what* she will research and *how* she will design her inquiry. Researchers select methods and a research genre that will not only suit the research question optimally, but will also indicate the researcher's (reflexive) knowledge of how language makes meaning, what role theory plays in interpretation and understanding, and how ideology and politics manifest in the research.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) describe in much detail three educational research paradigms: the positivist, interpretivist and critical paradigms. Babbie and Mouton (2001) describe the interpretivist research paradigm as the interpretation or understanding of human behaviour, as opposed to the explanation or prediction of it through a positivist approach. This is based on the "assumption that human phenomena are fundamentally distinct from natural phenomena" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 643). The significant departure of the interpretivist paradigm from that of the positivist, which holds that reality is thought of as 'out there' ready to be discovered by a dispassionate observer, is that "reality is constructed by interested knowers" (John, 2009, p. 91). The crucial activity "of the interpretive paradigm is to understand the subjective world of human experience" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 21), therefore reality is understood to be both subjective and value-laden. This study is situated in the interpretivist paradigm.

Various discourses of the interpretivist paradigm exist, of which ethnomethodology and narrative studies could be considered within the context of my research. Ethnomethodology focuses on how people make sense of their everyday world,

especially with regard to "the mechanisms by which participants achieve and sustain interaction in a social encounter – the assumptions they make, the conventions they utilise and the practices they adopt" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 23). Ethnomethodology is based on the work of Harold Garfinkel who holds that all people are "continuously trying to make sense of the lives they experience" (Babbie & Mouton, 2001, p. 30) and thus everyone naturally acts as a social scientist. Cohen et al. (2007) distinguish between linguistic ethnomethodologists, concerned with the use of language and the way in which conversations are structured, and situational ethnomethodologists. The latter examine a wide range of social activity in order to understand how social contexts are negotiated. Their 'take nothing for granted' approach deliberately uncovers assumptions in order to understand how people make sense of, and order, their environment. A home group bible study is such a social activity, and this research seeks to examine this phenomenon through the lens of adult learning theories.

The narrative approach was also a consideration to tackle this research. Writing in the introduction to the book *Making Meaning of Narratives* Josselson (Josselson & Lieblich, 1999, p. x) says that she prefers "to think of narrative research as a hermeneutic mode of inquiry, where the process of inquiry flows from the question – which is a question about a person's inner, subjective reality and, in particular, how a person makes meaning of some aspect of his or her experience." This approach also fitted well with my proposed research in that the learning practiced by the participants in home group bible study is often manifest through the medium of anecdote and stories.

After due consideration I decided that this research be conducted through an ethnomethodological approach according to Mouton's (2001) research design map. He describes ethnographic case study research as being qualitative in nature, aiming to provide in-depth description of a small number of cases, in which the key research questions are exploratory or descriptive, and situated in a small community.

Research methods used

My research intended to interpret what the nature and processes of learning was all about, and in what broader religious context the learning was situated. Its aim was to create a fuller picture, a thick description, taking the perspectives of the core actors into account. These included the leader of the home group bible study and participants (incidentally couples) who were willing to reflect their thoughts in a journal, so the

sample was self-selected.

Citing Lincoln and Guba, and in further support of what makes naturalistic research particular in its character, Cohen et al. (2007) state that the research must be set in its natural settings because context is implicated in meaning. In addition, humans, in all their thinking, feeling, moving and spiritual dimensions, are the research instrument. They also contend that the natural mode of reporting is the case study.

In interviewing three couples who are engaged in home group bible study it was crucial to surface their inner, subjective reality in a robust way. As Josselson and Lieblich (1999) point out, there is the danger that there may be a lack of congruence between the interview data and the conceptual framework should I fail to develop a wider theoretical meaning beyond an interesting story about remarkable people or phenomena.

Research methods in this study included observations of four home group bible study sessions, analysis of journals, semi-structured interviews of a purposive sample and document analysis. There is a spectrum of participation involved in observation from 'complete participant' to 'complete observer'. I elected to take the role of 'observer-as-participant': all the members of the home group bible study knew that I was observing their sessions as a researcher. I chose to minimise contact with the group by sitting back from everyone during the sessions, and making notes unobtrusively. I took field-notes and also recorded the sessions, with permission, sacrificing clarity of sound for discretion. This approach allowed me to observe the intimate moments during the bible study, but not to affect dynamics of or meaning-making in the group.

The documents analysed pertained to the history of and rationale for bible study in the Methodist Church. Internet sources, church records and guidelines were used to provide the context of the theology and practice of bible study.

Explanations of the various aspects of the home group bible study happen at different levels, starting with a description of the particular theology practiced in this denomination, the worship practices of the local church, the programme the bible study home group followed, and reasons for embarking on a particular study within this home group. Babbie and Mouton (2001) describe the process as immersing oneself in the natural setting, describing the events as accurately as possible as they have occurred,

or are occurring, and slowly but surely building second order constructs, a hypothesis and ultimately a theory.

My research approach fitted well with the interpretive paradigm in which "attempts are made to gain deep insights into phenomena with a view to interpret the world in terms of its actors and the meaning such actors attach to their experience of the world" (John, 2009, p. 91). This research intended to understand this phenomenon through the eyes of the role players themselves. It was hoped that how these actors interpret their world could be captured through interpretive research. "The nature of the phenomenon under study should determine the choice of paradigm and methodology" (John, 2009, p. 93). It therefore seemed appropriate that this research be situated in the interpretivist paradigm using a case study methodology.

Case study methodology

Reasons for a case study methodology in educational research included exploring an issue within a limited focused setting, and generating understanding and insight through a thick, detailed description of the case in relation to its context. In the instance of this research, the most compelling features of case study research is that it is embedded in a context, and has the means to examine the interconnectedness of the parts of a bounded system. Case study research also seeks firstly to understand comprehensively the group under study and secondly to develop theory about the order in social structures and process (Becker, cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Millar (1983, p. 115) echoes Merriam's views when he writes that case study research attempts "to understand the social processes and meanings implicit in some undertaking in a restricted context".

Characteristics of case study research include being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic. The particularistic nature of this study allows for a focus on a particular phenomenon, event, programme or situation. The descriptive nature of case study research allows me to "show the influence of personalities on the issue, show the influence of the passage of time on the issue" (Merriam, 1998, pp. 30-31). Its heuristic nature allows for an explanation of the background of the phenomenon, and evaluation and summary of the programme. These three characteristics of case study research fitted the purpose of my intended research completely.

Case study methodology was used for this research because this was a study of a single instance (one home group bible study), and the research sought an in-depth exploration of learning within a particular home group bible study and within the context of a particular theology as espoused by the church, and the practices of its worshipping community. The purposive sample of one home group bible study situated within both the denomination (Methodist) and church where I worship was so that I had familiarity with the theology and worship practices for the context of home group bible study. I held an outsider position with regard to the home group because the participants were not all well known to me, nor I to them, but an insider position with respect to being a fellow worshipper and congregant.

Rule and John (2011) discuss several criteria used in determining the quality of case study research. These are distinct from the measures of quality of validity, reliability and generalisability found in quantitative research. Whilst the measure of generalisability is paramount in the positivist paradigm, it is not applicable in case study research. The purpose of case study research is to generate "in-depth, holistic and situated understandings of a phenomenon with", citing Stake, "the explicit intention of gaining understanding of the particularity of the case" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 105). Rule and John name alternate measures of quality such as transferability, credibility, dependability and confirmability in case study research.

Analysis was done through coding and content analysis of interviews; and content analysis of home group bible study interactions and journals was carried out. Document analysis through listing document types provided confirmation or refutation of evidence.

All interviews were transcribed for analysis purposes. Copies are stored with the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Limitations

The church from which this home group bible study is drawn is situated in an old, established middle-class suburb to the north of the city of Johannesburg. The congregation of 232 adult members and 34 children members is drawn from the surrounding suburbs. There are two services on a Sunday, the first at 09h00 which serves a mostly white congregation, and the other at 14h00 which is a service conducted in the vernacular, and has mostly black congregants. The bible study home

group that agreed to participate in this study is drawn from the first service congregation and consequently reflects a lack of diversity amongst its members. In a country of such remarkable diversity the apartheid architecture remains visible in such social interactions. Home group bible study provides an opportunity to grapple with issues of transformation within a faith-based framework and owing to the homogeneity of the group there is not often an opportunity to hear the voice of the 'other'.

I hold the position of fellow congregant in a small congregation and it is difficult to know what element of 'pleasing' the researcher, or of trying to give 'correct' answers there may be. To mitigate this, data was collected through observation of the home group bible study, journals and semi-structured interviews. I was also very careful not to discuss findings or analysis of data with members of the bible study home group at any time. Part of the triangulation of data collection included members of the home group bible study writing their reflections in a journal. There was great reluctance on the part of the group to embark on this exercise and only 6 of the 12 members were prepared to journal. Ultimately only 5 members did keep a journal. This group thus 'self-selected' themselves for the semi-structured interviews.

There may be instances when it was difficult to isolate learning experiences directly related to home group bible study. This is because of my belief that God does speak to us through many avenues, of which bible study is one means to confront our meaning perspectives.

Data analysis could be influenced by personal bias and inexperience of conducting research.

Ethical considerations

Ethical behaviour is described by Cohen et al. (2007) as taking into account the effects of research on participants and acting in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings. The participants in this research were adults who were asked deeply personal and probing questions about their faith life. In order to be transparent about the purpose of the study I ensured that permission was obtained through the official channels (church body), and that participants were invited to contribute to the study on the understanding that they were free to withdraw for any reason and at any time if they

so wished. In addition, the participants would not be identified but would remain anonymous and the data from the research would be dealt with confidentially. They were also informed that they would have access to the transcripts and could see a copy of the research once completed and that the data would be placed on record with the university for a period of five years. The participants were also provided with a copy of the transcripts of their one-on-one interviews and one-on-couple interviews, and allowed to check for veracity. I was open and honest about the intentions and conditions under which the study was carried out.

The nature of bible study is to tussle with deep personal issues of self and faith, and self in faith. This grappling happens within a context of trust and safety that has been built up through the development of meaningful personal relationships. One of the bible study home groups I initially approached turned down my request to participate in the study. There was a great deal of circumspection about having an outsider observing their study and they were afraid of being judged on their beliefs and viewpoints. In fact, for some, it is the very sanctity of the time and place that encourages transformative learning to take place. Intertwined with this aspect is the possibility that some members deal with life's difficult circumstances through attending bible study, and this process may be interrupted by the presence of a researcher. Within certain groups some members may have developed complacency with the people and process, and uninvited research may affect their equilibrium. In summary this was research into people's personal learning journeys that needed to be handled sensitively.

In approaching a second group I was invited to first meet the group to outline the purpose and scope of the research. Bearing in mind the warranted reaction of the first group I was careful to offer the following reassurances. I would only begin observations after a period of the group getting used to me and to my presence. To mitigate this uninvited intrusion all observations would be conducted unobtrusively (I would sit back from the group, I would not participate in discussion, and notes would be made discretely). The group generously invited me to begin immediately which I declined as I was still in the process of refining the observation schedule. No details of incidents or direct quotes were to be made regarding personal disclosures, and all participants would remain anonymous. The focus was on learning from the group.

Organisation of study and overview

This thesis starts with an introduction to the study and rationale for embarking on this research in the first chapter. I then move into a literature review that outlines an overview of the theories that inform adult education, and then explores the theories of communities of practice and holistic learning more fully. The background to the church and its theology, and bible study practice are also outlined. In the next chapter the methodology employed is explained in more detail. Chapter 4 reports on the data and research findings, and in chapter 5 the research is summarised and the research questions are discussed in the light of the theories used: the case is closed. In chapter 5 I also reopen the case through a discussion of the implications of the study in adult education.

Chapter 2   Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This review of the literature pertinent to the study of adult learning in a non-formal context of home group bible study will deal with characteristics and theories of adult learning, and the development of such theories. It also engages with how and why adult learning differs from earlier life experiences of learning in childhood and early adulthood. Concepts will be clarified and the theoretical framework that informs and guides this research will be expanded.

Adult education in South Africa has a long and rich history, and has been deeply interconnected with the socio-political circumstances of its time. A brief overview of this history is also outlined.

This particular bible study home group is part of a suburban Methodist congregation, and a brief outline of the church's theology is provided. In addition, the philosophy on bible study of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (MCSA) is presented.

Maxwell (2006) notes that the literature review should inform a planned study through defining focus and elucidating the conceptual framework, design and justification of the study.

Learning in adulthood

> Adult learners are mature, socially responsible individuals who participate in sustained informal or formal activities that lead them to acquire new knowledge, skills or values; elaborate on existing knowledge, skills or values; revise their basic beliefs and assumptions; or change the way they see some aspect of themselves or the world around them. … Learning in some form is an aspect of virtually every person's life. (Cranton, 2006, p. 2)

Despite Cranton's prosaic overview of learning in adulthood, she questions the universality of describing the general characteristics of adult learning. She is concerned about the diversity of human experience, context, and the content and process of adult learning. Cranton argues that there is not always a clear distinction between the ways in which children and adults learn. However there is a large field of theoretical knowledge about adult learning and in this section I provide a framework of theories pertinent to this research.

Tusting and Barton (2003) state that learning in adulthood is complex, unique and situated. They list seven features of adult learning: it has purpose that is related to real lives and the practices and roles required by this real life; it is directed towards adults becoming autonomous learners; it holds that adults are capable of learning about how to learn; it is a characteristic of all real-life activities; it is a consequence of reflections on resolving problems and issues that arise in life experiences; each event is unique, incidental and accidental; and finally it has the potential to be both personally and socially transformative.

Brookfield (cited in Tusting & Barton, 2003, p. 22) proffers the opinion that learning in adulthood is different from learning in childhood in that certain characteristics are more pronounced in adult learners. Such characteristics include

> the ability to think dialectically and contextually, moving back and forth between general and particular, objective and subjective; the ability to employ practical logic, reasoning within a particular situation in a way that springs from a deep understanding of the context of the situation and pays attention to its internal features; and an ability to become aware of how we know what we know and 'learn to learn'.

Tusting and Barton (2003) provide a useful framework in their review of adult learning literature. Their framework lists three key influences on the ways in which we understand how adults learn. The first paradigm of learning comes from a psychological perspective. Early research into how learning happens focused on the individual, and theories include behaviourism, cognitivism, cognitive constructivism and developmental psychology. Later developments in understanding how people learn focused on the social context and the interaction of the individual with others. Theories in this social participation paradigm include social constructivism, sociocultural psychology, activity theory and situated cognition.

The second key influence arises out of adult education theories. The multitude of learning theories reviewed by Tusting and Barton (2003) include self-directed learning, informal learning, learning how to learn, critical reflection and experiential learning and transformative learning. To this could be added other theories such as Freire's (1972) emancipatory learning and holistic learning (Dirkx, 2001; Tisdell, 2008).

Tusting and Barton (2003) cite a third influence on adult learning from other fields of management: distance and online learning. These fields of learning are seen as a response to the context of rapid and extensive change in which we live.

In this next section I briefly examine the history of adult education in South Africa. As a case in point I attempt to highlight the role of adult education in its response to a changing socio-political context. This concise overview of adult education in South Africa is drawn from Aitchison's (2002) detailed history of adult education in South Africa. In no way does this overview come close to surfacing the complexity of the development and decline of adult education in South Africa, nor of highlighting contributions made by it to the socio-political and economic development in this country.

Adult education in South Africa

There is a long and rich history of adult education in South Africa, the legacy of which has been sadly diminished and weakened under the new democracy. The early origins of adult education trace back to the early part of the 20th century where the focus fell on the westernisation of black adults, often in tandem with Christian evangelism. Given the lack of education opportunities offered to black people then, there was a profound need for literacy and basic education. The term 'adult education' is often conflated with 'literacy studies' and 'basic adult education', and this continues to the present day, despite the wide range of ways (non-formal, informal and formal) in which adults are engaged in learning activities in this country.

At the start of the 1900s literacy and basic school education for black adults was provided in night schools. Until the 1940s South Africa's economy was based on agriculture and mining, and thus there was thought to be no need for a workforce to be well educated or highly skilled. Post World War Two saw the need for more highly qualified workers, especially in the manufacturing sector. At this time there was a burgeoning adult education movement, with the number of night schools increasing, university extra mural classes in Johannesburg and Cape Town and the start of a Bureau for Literacy and Literature. With the Nationalist Party's win in the 1948 South African elections, the new government began to dismantle the night schools such that by the 1960s they were virtually non-existent. Amongst other groups, two in particular raised their voices in concern at the rising authoritarianism and repression: the church,

especially the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist; and English-speaking universities.

The 1953 Bantu Education Act made the education of black people illegal unless offered by a government registered school, this to exclude the influence of churches on the system. Night schools, even those registered with the government, were systematically shut down.

During the 1960s, the first non-governmental literacy organisations were established. These initiatives marked the beginning of a robust adult education movement which, in its various forms, "clothed much mini-*apartheid* work" (Aitchison, 2002, p. 134).

During the 1970s the work of Paulo Freire, a radical Brazilian educator, began to influence the work of those involved with community education and literacy classes. Organisations that dealt with exploitative conditions for black workers were established and at this time and under these circumstances, the roots of modern South Africa's trade union movements were developed.

The 1976 Soweto uprising by school children who protested against the imposition of Afrikaans as the language of instruction proved to be "the turning point in the political struggle that came to a climax in the late eighties" (Aitchison, 2002, p. 137). The 1980s in South Africa was marked by much political struggle and turmoil, and an embattled economy as a consequence of extensive sanctions. The trade union movement began to take shape, under the umbrella of the United Democratic Front. The revival in literacy and adult education saw small and large non-governmental education organisations, some universities and the government of the day becoming involved in initiatives to provide much needed basic education to adults. In some form or another, the universities of Cape Town, Natal, Western Cape and Witwatersrand established Chairs or Centres of Adult Education.

In the early nineties, following the unbanning of various political organisations, Aitchison summarises this period as one in which there were sincere "efforts to develop new educational policies, significant failures to really transform the South African education system, and very harsh economic situations in which South Africa has rejoined the highly competitive global economy" (Aitchison, 2002, p. 146). At the same time there was "serious weakening of the university and non-governmental bases for adult education and thinking" (Aitchison, 2002, p. 146).

In summarising the work of adult educators over the first decade of the new democracy Aitchison writes of the pervasive sadness that nothing has come of the hoped for renaissance in adult education. The problems of implementation continue to plague the system, and there has been a failure to gain support at national government level for this enterprise. The non-governmental organisation (NGO) base has also failed to get adult education initiatives to a critical mass, and continues to search for funding and financial support. Linking adult education to the political transformation of South Africa, Aitchison concludes his review of the history of adult education in South Africa with the point: "as dependent as any enhancement of adult education provision is on political will, it is likely that its successes and sometimes dreadful defeats will continue to reflect the South African struggle to be a more democratic, enlightened and industrious society" (Aitchison, 2002, pp. 168-169).

Having had a cursory look at how adult education in South Africa has waxed and waned, I now move to examining the concepts of lifelong and lifewide learning in adult education.

Lifelong and lifewide learning

Post World War Two has seen remarkable growth in international thinking and policy making with regard to adult education and training, as evidenced by the emerging concepts of lifelong learning or lifelong education, the learning organisation and the learning society (Tight, 2002). During the 1960s and 1970s the development of a learning society and lifelong education were seen as indispensible to allowing world citizens to cope with the increasing pace of economic, social and technological change; to redressing the inadequacies of the then current education and training practices; and to the democratisation of educational opportunities. In March 2000 the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning stated that "lifelong learning is no longer just one aspect of education and training; it must become the guiding principle for provision and participation across the full continuum of learning contexts" (Commission of European Communities, as cited in Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 1). More recently, in 2007, the Directorate-General for Education and Culture of the European Commission published their eight competences of lifelong learning. "Key competences are those which all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment" (European Commission, Key competences for lifelong learning, 2007). Together these statements show the emphasis on the globalisation imperative through educational policy.

Lifelong learning is understood to have humanistic, societal and economic foci and includes its "crucial importance ... for enriching personal lives, fostering economic growth and maintaining social cohesion" (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, cited in Merriam, et al., 2007) and promoting active citizenship (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 48). In the Report of the Commission on Social Justice cited by Mayo (1997) lifelong learning, especially with regard to skills development, is held to increase "people's capacity to add value to the economy, to take charge of their own lives, and to contribute to their families and communities" (Mayo, 1997, p. 15). Also, according to the report, lifelong learning improves social justice and empowerment of citizens. However, lifelong learning has not necessarily provided the hoped for democratic change envisioned, and the "associated structures of the welfare state, interventionist government and supranational organization have all come in for a great deal of criticism in the last three decades" (Tight, 2002, p. 38).

Certainly the role of lifelong learning in this country to empower its citizens and to improve social justice is debatable as is evidenced by the National Planning Commission Report of 2011 (Manuel, 2011). The report shows how the schooling system has failed its citizens. In South Africa of the one million school leavers per annum, 65% do not have a grade 12 certificate. In the 2010 matriculation examinations, despite the improving percentage of those who did gain a grade 12 certificate, only 15% were able to gain an average mark of more than 40% which effectively means that only 7% of children born between 1990 and 1994 were able to achieve this standard (Manuel, 2011).

What these statistics disguise is the widespread inability of the recently schooled to think critically. Brookfield's characteristics of the adult learner able to think contextually and dialectically, able to generalise and reason inductively, able to think about how one thinks, and able to apply practical logic are missing in many young adults who are embarking on their lifelong learning journey.

According to the National Planning Commission for those who have left school

> In 2011 only 115 000 enrolled in general-vocational programmes in further education and training colleges. The further education and training college system is characterised by limited growth in enrolments and poor throughput rates. The challenge facing post-school education in South Africa is to find ways to assist the vast majority of school-leavers who do not qualify for direct entry into higher education or employment. (Manuel, 2011, p. 16)

The regulatory environment controlling higher education and training effectively precludes anyone without a grade 12 certificate from further participation in the formal education sector. In addition there is great emphasis placed on formal qualifications for those trying to gain employment. It is this emphasis on the initial and formal modes of learning within the lifelong spectrum that led one of the participants in the bible study home group to comment that I would find nothing of interest in observing their group, as there was no learning happening there. This directly conflicts with the views summarised in Tusting and Barton (2003) and Cranton (2006) who cite, amongst other features, that learning is a characteristic of all real life activities. Adult learning is also seen as a consequence of reflection on problems and issues that arise in life, with such unique events involving incidental and accidental learning. Learning as adults has the potential to be both personally and socially transformative.

Despite the lack of promise offered through lifelong education, both within the complex South African socio-political arena and globally, this concept has become reborn and has "become the subject of increasing attention at the level of both policy and research" (Tight, 2002, p. 38).

Barnett (2010), writing on lifewide education as a possible new and transformative concept for higher education, shows how people are simultaneously occupying multiple learning spaces as part of their lives through "work, non-work, family, leisure, social networks, occupational networks, social engagement and manifold channels of news, information and communication, not to mention physical and global mobility (actual and virtual)" (Barnett, 2010, p. 1).   To this list could be added community activities and faith networks. Whilst lifelong learning is understood to be learning over the lifetime of a person, lifewide learning is understood to take place across space, and "suggests a concept of liquid learning, a multiplicity of forms of learning and thence of *being* experienced by the learner contemporaneously" (Barnett, 2010, p. 1). Barnett is careful to explain that these multiple learning experiences are different in cost, recognition, sharedness, power, visibility and ownership.

In speculating about the notion of lifelong learning Edwards (2006) accepts that learning is both lifelong and lifewide, but seeks to frame the concept of context and its relationship to learning. He asks "what makes something specifically a learning context … what are the boundaries of a learning context and how are these established … and how do people learn across contexts?" (Edwards, 2006, p. 2). Barnett more easily accepts the intermingling of time and space for learning, and holds that anyone may at

any time experience several forms of learning all at once. In the bible study home group one of the participants had just completed her examinations to qualify as a teacher. She is also a qualified Chartered Accountant so her story exemplified the intermingling of formal and non-formal education both over time and space.

As stated before, lifelong and lifewide learning as concepts have, over time, been defined in many ways and may be taken to include all forms of learning such as formal, informal and non-formal learning (Merriam, et al., 2007), and self-directed learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982). In the next section I explore the concepts of informal and non-formal learning, especially with regard to home group bible study, but it should nevertheless be noted that participation by adults in bible study is part of their lifelong and lifewide learning journey.

Nonformal and informal learning

Mocker and Spear (1982) identify four situations of learning, using a two-by-two matrix that is based on the locus of control over the means and objectives of the learning act (see Figure 1). In this framework formal learning happens where the institution controls both purpose and process; informal learning where the institution controls the purpose and the learner the process; self-directed learning where the learner controls both the means and objectives of learning; and finally, non-formal learning where the learner controls the purpose but not the process.
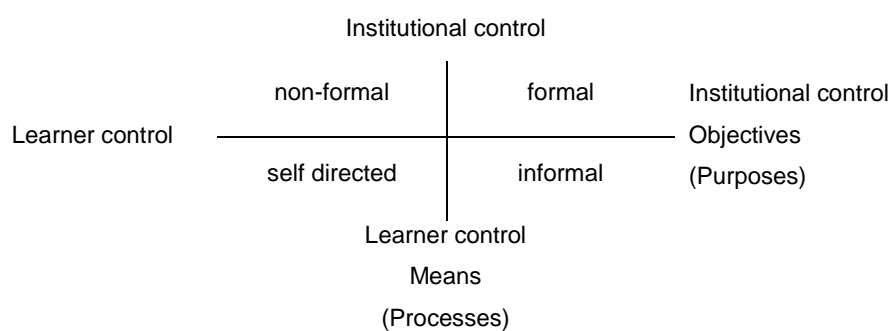
Figure 1. Situations of learning (Mocker & Spear, 1982, p. 4)

Tennant (1991) argues that the notion of self-directed and autonomous learning is one of the few core concepts that have laid the foundation for adult education's distinct field of practice and enquiry. However he notes that the concept of self-directed learning is open to many interpretations. This is supported by Cranton (2006) who, in citing Knowles, says that whilst adult learners have a preference for being self-directed, the

word 'preference' has been overlooked and adult education theory now almost equates this concept with the practice of adult education. Citing Knowles, Tough and Moore, and in agreement with Mocker and Spear's (1982) framework, Tennant argues that "at one end of the spectrum, self-directed learning is thought to occur when learners determine goals and objectives, locate appropriate resources, plan their learning strategies, and evaluate the outcomes" (Tennant, 1991, p. 194). At the other end of the spectrum, citing Mezirow and Brookfield, self-directed learning includes the concept of critical awareness: the capacity of learners to "identify and challenge assumptions governing their lives" (Tennant, 1991, p. 194). The emancipation from their psychological and cultural assumptions brings them in touch with their authentic needs, and into an understanding of legitimate alternatives.

The Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (cited by Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 1) states explicitly that all meaningful learning activities fall within the definition of lifelong learning. The learning activities are taken to include: formal learning, understood to lead to formal and recognised qualifications; non-formal learning processes that supplement the mainstream education and training systems; and informal learning processes, "which are a natural accompaniment to everyday life ... The 'lifewide' dimension brings the complementarity of formal, non-formal and informal learning into sharper focus" (Commission of the European Communities, as cited in Alheit & Dausien, 2002, p. 1).

Merriam et al. (2007) concur with the definitions in the Memorandum of three types of adult education: formal, the learning that leads to qualification and takes place in educational institutions; non-formal, the learning which takes place in community organisations, amongst others; and informal learning, or everyday learning. Non-formal offerings are characterised by having few prerequisites, being short term, voluntary, having a facilitated framework of curriculum, local and community based, time compressed, hands-on, interactive, and marked by informality and where the needs and interests of learners take centre stage. Features of such learning also include flexibility, less structure and more concern with social inequalities.

Based on the definitions of Merriam et al. (2007) and the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (cited by Alheit & Dausien, 2002) I situate home group bible study as a non-formal learning activity. Because home group bible study takes place at community level, rather than institutional level, and is characterised by volunteerism, there are few barriers to entry (and exit), high levels of interactivity, and it is often learner-driven; it

thus fits well with the definition of Merriam et al. and as espoused in the Memorandum. However, according to Mocker and Spear's (1982) typology, home group bible study would be defined as informal study, because whilst there is a high degree of locus of control by the learner over the means of learning through home group bible study, there is far greater institutional control over objectives and purpose in that the church's theology will determine much of the underlying purposes for the bible study.

Brennan, cited in Merriam et al. (2007, pp. 30–31), further develops three types of non-formal education relative to the formal education system as complementary, alternative or supplementary. The purposes of complementary, alternative or supplementary non-formal education are respectively those failed by or in the system; those focused on social or personal change, or linked with embedding culture; and lastly those driven by response to national or global issues. According to Brennan's typology, bible study would be classified as alternative non-formal education because of its personal and social change dimensions.

Social constructivist perspective

Merriam et al. (2007) list five orientations of learning, each of which includes several learning theories. Of interest in my research is the distinction between how people learn in a social environment as understood by social cognitivists and by social constructivists. Social cognitive learning draws on both behaviourist and cognitive orientations, and holds that people learn from observing others. The focus is on the social setting in which learning takes place. More specifically learning is seen as a function of the interaction of the person with the environment and the behaviour. By contrast, constructivism theorises that people construct knowledge through their own experiences. "Meaning-making is emphasized as both an individual mental activity and a socially interactive interchange" (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 297). Driver et al. (cited by Merriam, et al., 2007, pp. 291-292) succinctly define knowledge building as understood by social constructivists as that which is "constructed when individuals engage socially in talk and activity about shared problems or tasks. Meaning making is thus a dialogic process involving persons-in-conversation, and learning is the process by which individuals are introduced to a culture by more skilled members." Indeed this definition highlights both the process and outcome of knowledge construction through home group bible study, and underscores the fact that learning happens through dialogue in a cooperative and collaborative manner. Further to this point, Gergen (cited by Merriam, et al., 2007) views learning as engaging, incorporating and critically

examining others' viewpoints, and thereby opening new possibilities of interpretation.

Lyster and John (2008) note that key theorists on cognition, Piaget and Vygotsky, have influenced those in the field of education especially with regard to experiential education and critical thinking. In particular, and with regard to small group bible study, Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivism has relevance. The theory holds that learners are essentially dependent on others for the construction of knowledge, that learning holds some degree of discomfort and there is a move towards independent problem-solving of more advanced problems. Also, according to Rogoff (cited in Kim, 2001), individuals share understanding through their interactions based on mutual assumptions and interests which form the basis of their communication. This intersubjectivity amongst individuals permits the construction of social meanings and knowledge as they are "shaped and evolve through negotiation within the communicating groups" and, further, "any personal meanings shaped through these experiences are affected by the intersubjectivity of the community to which the people belong" (Kim, 2001, p. 3).

Vygotsky maintains that learning is socially mediated through the symbols and language of specific cultures, and that learning is the cultural sharing of ways of understanding and knowing the world and its reality. Theories and models associated with social constructivism include activity theory, or situated cognition as it is known in the United States, Mezirow's transformative learning theory, self-directed learning, experiential learning, critical reflection, situated learning, cognitive apprenticeship and communities of practice. In the following section of this literature review the theory of communities of practice will be more fully explored.

Palincsar (1998) cites Voss' et al. views on the 'sociocultural revolution' which holds that the locus of knowledge construction has moved from the perspective of the individual to that of the interdependence of individuals who acquire intellectual skills through social interaction. From a psychological viewpoint the cognitive perspective focuses on 'meaning making', and cognitive structures, such as schemata and heuristics, underlie the ability to both solve problems and transfer between phenomena. "Virtually all cognitive science theories entail some form of constructivism to the extent that cognitive structures are typically viewed as individually constructed in the process of interpreting experiences in particular contexts" (Palincsar, 1998, p. 347). Palincsar also notes that there is a continuum of social constructivism from trivial to radical constructivism. Trivial constructivism is concerned with the construction of

knowledge by the individual irrespective of whether or not these constructions are correct representations, whilst radical constructivism holds that there is no objective knowledge, rather that knowledge only emerges from dialogue with others. Kim (2001, p. 3), writing on the epistemology of social constructivism, says "for the social constructivist, reality cannot be discovered: it does not exist prior to its social invention." The research into home group bible study looked for evidence of how knowledge developed through dialogue and in relation with others, and where on this continuum it is situated. On Palincsar's continuum of social constructivism I view the home group bible study that I researched to be situated more towards radical constructivism, as knowledge emerged through questioning, debate and dialogue. Individuals in the group frequently referenced the construction of knowledge through social interactions.

Reed et al. (2010), researching within the milieu of natural resource management in the USA, argue that there are three key misconceptions in existing research that focus on how adults learn in social settings. They hold that social learning in itself and the conditions or means by which social learning is facilitated are often conflated. There is also conflation in the literature between the how (the process) and what (the potential outcomes) people learn from each other. Lastly they argue that the focus of social learning has been at the level of the individual: there is no acknowledgement of deeper change at group, community or societal scales. In seeking greater conceptual clarity and definition, Reed et al. hold that "social learning may be defined as a change in understanding that goes beyond the individual to become situated within wider social units or communities of practice through social interactions between actors within social networks" (Reed, et al., 2010, p. 5). This view is echoed by Kasl and Elias (2000, p. 229) when they cite Imel's caveat that "adult educators should become aware that the idea of group learning can also refer to the possibility that the group as an entity learns."

In this next section I develop the theories of community of practice and holistic learning. Holistic learning is seen as a variant of Mezirow's transformative learning theory, and the basic tenets of transformative learning theory are therefore also outlined.

Communities of practice theory: background

This qualitative research is situated in the interpretivist paradigm. My case study research is underpinned by social constructivist perspectives, and seeks to understand and theorise how adults learn in a non-formal small group bible study. According to the literature, the main orientations of adult learning in home group bible study would appear to be clustered around the concept of social constructivism, especially through transformative learning as evidenced in communities of practice, and holistic learning. The following theorists need to be critically considered with regard to their understanding of learning: Vygotsky; Lave and Wenger; Mezirow, Dirkx, English and Tisdell.

Adult learning theories based on the perspective of collaboration amongst learners within a social context include reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, webquests and anchored instruction (Shunk, cited in Kim, 2001; Palincsar, 1998). From my perspective the most practical application of learning with others is Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of community of practice. Home group bible study has a strong element of learning through social interaction and my research will explore learning in a community of practice.

Maynard (2001) summarises Lave and Wenger's (1991) 'situated learning perspective' approach. Citing Resnick, she writes that this perspective includes interrelated theories that focus on the whole person, and on the relationship between the person and the context and culture in which they learn. "Lave and Wenger do not view learning as individual cognitive processing but as a process of participation in 'communities of practice'. Thus, learning is not a case of the individual acting *on* the world but of the individual acting *in* the world" (Maynard, 2001, p. 41). Maynard thus emphasises the social nature of learning, which lies at the heart of home group bible study.

Communities of practice: the theory

Lave and Wenger (1991) first created the expression 'community of practice' whilst researching apprenticeship as a model for learning. Their research showed a complex set of social interrelationships through which learning resulted. According to community of practice theory, initial participation by the apprentice is peripheral, but over time the learner begins to engage more fully and to deal with increasing complexity in the practice. The learner "moves centripetally towards full participation,

and in so doing both absorbs and is absorbed in the culture of practice" (Maynard, 2001, p. 41). Lave and Wenger used the words 'community' and 'practice' to denote that it was the practice within community that acted as a "living curriculum for the apprentice" (Wenger, 2006, p. 4). It was in giving form and shape to this concept that Lave and Wenger began to see how widespread the practice was, and saw that it was not only confined to inexperienced practitioners. Within this dynamic learning environment everyone is involved in the learning experience.

Wenger provides a succinct definition of communities of practice as groups of people engaged "in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavour" (Wenger, 2006, p. 1). He further defines three elements - domain, community and practice - of a community of practice. Domain refers in particular to a shared domain of interest, with group members committed to this interest, there being a shared competence amongst the members, and having expertise internally recognised by the members. Community is understood to mean an engagement by the members in joint activities and discussions in order to help each other and share information. Practice is taken to mean that the members are in fact practitioners with a shared repertoire of resources by way of experiences, stories, tools and ways of addressing recurring problems. All communities of practice share these elements, whilst the forms they take differ widely. Communities of practice may be small or large; local or global; face to face or online; within or without organisations; and formally constituted or taking the shape of informal gatherings. Wenger makes the point that it is their very familiarity that sometimes causes us to ignore their existence, but in using this framework it allows us to "perceive the structures defined by engagement in practice and the informal learning that comes with it" (Wenger, 2006, p. 3).

To further elucidate the concept of community of practice it is useful to quote Wenger

> … practices are thus the property of a kind of community created over time by the sustained pursuit of a shared enterprise. … The concept of practice connotes doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do … We all have our own theories and ways of understanding the world, and our communities of practice are places where we develop, negotiate, and share them. (Wenger, 1998, pp. 45-48)

Wenger's (1998) understanding of a social theory of learning is one in which the four necessary components of community (learning through belonging), identity (learning as becoming), meaning (learning as experience) and practice (learning as doing) are integrated in a way that characterises "social participation as a process of learning and knowing" (Wenger, 1998, pp. 4-5). A home group bible study provides an opportunity for the members to enter into discourse about the bible in the context of their theology in order to deepen their understanding of the bible, within a context of relationship-building, and emotional and psychological support. It is Wenger's contention, as given in the quote above, that the 'doing' (i.e. the practices of attending the group, reading, debating, praying, listening and participating) happens in both a social and historical context, and that learning (creation of meaning) has a central role in the community of practice (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003).

What is the practice involved in home group bible study? Anderson (1998), in his development of a framework for defining the self within a community of faith, religious tradition and practice draws on the social psychological work of George Herbert Mead, neo-Piagetian developmental psychology of Robert Kegan, and cultural-linguistic framework for doctrine proposed by George Lindbeck. Anderson develops the concept of self as both socially constructed and the process of "faithing", the construction of the religious self, as a type of social relatedness. He sees the development of the human self arising from and dependent on the social context in which the individual lives. Anderson cites Mead's framework which interrelates language, the social and development of self-consciousness, and develops his argument further that "communication or a 'conversation of gestures' is required for the development of 'mind'. Such a conversation of gestures requires a relational/social context" (Anderson, 1998, p. 175). Furthermore, Mead's socially constructed and related self is involved in a lifelong journey of internalising this conversation of gestures. Kegan examines the social context more closely than Mead in which the dynamic nature of certain cultures provides the context within which the self grows "in continuously expanding matrices of relation and taking as content for the self what had in the previous stage provided structure for the self" (Anderson, 1998, p. 177).

The issue of identity is an integral part of social learning theory, and is deeply connected with practice, community and meaning. Wenger (1998, p. 145) holds that identity includes the ability, or lack of it, "to shape the meanings that define our communities and our forms of belonging. … Building an identity consists of negotiating the meanings of our experience of membership in social communities." Wenger is

clear that it is the interplay between the community and person that is important, and thus acknowledges the social character of identity. Our social relations are reflected in our practices, language, artifacts and world views, and in moments of deep reflection concepts, images and perspectives used are filtered by our participation in social communities. The converse is not true however. Wenger states clearly that membership of a community "does not determine who we are in any simple way" (1998, p. 146), and that stereotyping and generalising denies the lived complexity of identity.

Wenger goes on to say that the creation of meaning happens through a process of negotiated meaning, which is understood to be "both historical and dynamic, contextual and unique" (1998, p. 54) and "the process by which we experience the world and our engagement in it as meaningful" (1998, p. 53). Indeed, he holds that it is in living our lives that we engage in a constant process of negotiation of meaning, underpinned by the complementary and discrete interplay between participation and reification.

Maynard's (2001) study on the process of school-based students learning to become teachers through 'learning as participation' looked, in part, at the development of teacher identity. She notes that the students deliberately, but unwittingly, adopted the behaviour of their class teacher. Through using the teacher's discourse they were able to gain acceptance into the community of practice, and their teacher's approval, and thus the means to negotiate richer and more appropriate understandings. However, Maynard highlights the 'uneasy relationship' that exists in teacher identity development between "the pull towards conformity and the push against authority" (Maynard, 2001, p. 50), and she questions how straightforward the relationship between newcomer and community of practice is.

Whilst Wenger focuses on the individual in community who seeks to make meaning, this is in contrast with the African ubuntuism concept of adult learning (Nafukho, 2006, p. 409). African perspectives on adult learning shifts the focus to how the collective, the community, finds its identity through meaning making. *Ubuntu* underpins African philosophy and way of life. *Ubuntu,* a word in the Southern African Nguni language family, serves as the spiritual foundation of most African societies, and means kindness, fellow feeling, or humanity (Nafukho, 2006), and belongingness, connectedness, community participation and people centeredness (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008). These manifest as mutual help, respect for life, cooperation, generosity, respect for older people, and preservation of the sacred. "Commitment to

the family includes an obligation to the living and the dead and to those yet to be born" (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 187). The maxim *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,* translated as 'a person is a person through other persons', encapsulates the African worldview. Citing Bangura, Nafukho gives the three main tenets of *ubuntu* as religiosity or spirituality, consensus building and dialogue. In the *ubuntu* worldview, the individual is defined in terms of his or her relationship with others. "This conception of individuality involves moving from solitary to solidarity, from independence to interdependence, from individuality vis-à-vis community to individuality à la community" (Nafukho, 2006, p. 410). The individual should never take precedence over community according to the *ubuntu* concept.

Merriam and Ntseane's (2008) study on transformational learning in Botswana looks at how culture, in particular *ubuntu*, can impact learning. Citing Hanson they note that "for some cultures and situations conformity to the group may be more important than critical autonomy. ... Self-reflection and critical thinking may be reputed to be universal 'goods', but we need to be aware of their cultural specificity and power" (Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 185). This study showed that whilst participants experienced (universal) dilemmas that triggered transformational learning, the nature of transformation was often through questioning "sociolinguistic premises involving specific ideologies, prescribed norms and roles, cultural and language codes" (Mezirow, cited in Merriam & Ntseane, 2008, p. 194).

Communities of practice: other studies

There is no shortage of articles on communities of practice theory. Wenger's book entitled *Communities of Practice. Learning, meaning and identity* is cited over 20 000 times in scholarly articles. The theory of communities of practice is used in teacher development studies, health practitioner work, workplace safety practice, and in management as a knowledge management mechanism. Merriam et al.'s (2003) study of how a group of Wiccans establish meaning and identity through a community of practice highlights how societies and groups considered subversive by society establish their practice.

Merriam et al. (2003, p. 171), studying the socially embedded nature of learning within a marginalised group, that of witches, argue that it is the very isolation of the group that provides a "better laboratory for understanding participation and learning in a community of practice." These spontaneously and informally constituted communities

of practice provide a rich ground for research. Communities that are marginalised introduce new members to the norms, values, attitudes and behaviours of the group through engaging them in the practice of the particular community. In fact they hold that it is learning that is central to a community of practice: "learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (Lave and Wenger, cited in Merriam, et al., 2003, p. 171).

Gherardi and Nicolini's (2002) ethnographic study of how safety becomes mastered by novices on a building site shows that knowledge and transmission of safety practice is enabled through a community of practice. They argue that beyond the formal training on safety, the real learning happens on the job. As apprentices observe extant work practices, there emerges an observation that experts develop a 'sense' of what is safe. An expert knows in a way that is not rule based, and this knowledge is not always easy to describe in formalised terms.

There are many articles and studies which examine the role of student teachers moving from inexpert to competent to masters of their classroom. In Maynard's (2001) research into how student teachers learn through participation in a school community of practice, this framework was useful in highlighting the various and changing pressures that impacted on the novices as they moved towards full participation in the school's community of practice. Students were able to appropriate meaning and identity through 'learning as participation'. However it should be noted that "learning as 'participation' did not adequately represent the complex relationship between the individual student, the newcomer, and the school community of practice nor the pain, conflict and loss that appeared to be inherent in the process of becoming a teacher" (Maynard, 2001, p. 51).

Communities of practice: critique

Cox (2005), in his comparative review of four seminal works on communities of practice, argues that the terms 'community' and 'practice' are appropriated for different uses both academically and practically. He traces the evolution of the theory over time showing that others and Wenger, too, use the terms differently, sometimes as "a conceptual lens through which to examine the situated social construction of meaning [and] at other times ... to refer to a virtual community or informal group sponsored by an organization to facilitate knowledge sharing or learning" (Cox, 2005, p. 527).

Cox (2005) compares the works of Lave and Wenger (1991), Brown and Duguid; Wenger (1998) and Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002), tracing the development of the theory from the socialisation of newcomers into knowledge through apprenticeship, to the improvising of new knowledge in reaction to shortcomings in management, to the impact that communities of practice have on individual identity, to the final work that shows a marked shift towards a knowledge management tool. What Cox highlights is that there are significant divergences with regard to the conceptualisation of community, learning, power, change, formality and diversity, and serves as a warning to me to be explicit about my understanding of these concepts.

Echoing Cox's concern about Wenger's lack of definition of terms used, Handley Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark (2006) concur that conceptual issues of situated learning remain undeveloped in the literature. Lindkvist (cited by Handley, et al., 2006, pp. 645-646) write that "the phrase 'community of practice' is somewhat ambiguous, and the related literature is 'still evolving' and 'hardly coherent'". They point out that there is considerable variation in the descriptive dimensions, and that communities of practice are heterogeneous with regard to pace of evolution, geographic spread and lifecycle.

Drawing on research in contemporary workplace settings of the manufacturing industry and secondary schools in the UK, Fuller, Hodkinson, Hodkinson and Unwin (2005) examine how Lave and Wenger's theories could apply to the nature and process of learning at work. Whilst they were able to find illustrative examples of how Lave and Wenger's theory was helpful in explaining data, they also highlight four "limitations of applying their perspective to contemporary workplaces in advanced industrial societies" (Fuller, et al., 2005, p. 50).

Firstly they are unconvinced by Lave and Wenger's (1991) attempt to stretch legitimate peripheral participation to cover all workplace learning. They cite examples where employees continued learning, despite having achieved full membership many years ago.

Secondly, they find Lave and Wenger (1991) too easily dismiss the role of teaching in the workplace learning process. Fuller et al. (citing Engeström; Billett; Fuller & Unwin) note that more recent writers have begun to address this limitation. Research is starting to show that employees from a broad spectrum of workplaces "are involved in 'teaching' a wide range of knowledge and skills" (Fuller, et al., 2005, p. 65). Not only do these findings support the conception of the social basis of learning through

participation, they also draw attention to how teaching in the workplace supports the learning process. The findings also highlight the fact "that apprentices as well as more experienced employees may have areas of 'knowledgeable skill' which they are capable of sharing with others" (Fuller, et al., 2005, p. 65). In addition, structured courses, dismissed by Lave and Wenger, can be seen as a variant of embodied learning, and may well form an integral part of wider learning within a community of practice.

Thirdly, Fuller et al. (2005) question Lave and Wenger's (1991) and Wenger's (1998) focus on learner identity as it is formed through belonging to a community of practice. Because Lave and Wenger "implicitly treat their newcomers as tabula rasa" (Fuller, et al., 2005, p. 66) they do not acknowledge that apprentices may already come into the workplace with prior learning, including education. Lifelong and lifewide learning (discussed earlier) means that novices in the workplace may arrive with a range of skills arising from part-time work experience whilst a student, IT skills developed during leisure time activity, and longer periods spent in general education (Fuller, et al., 2005).

Lastly, Fuller et al. (2005) question Lave and Wenger's acknowledgement of the role that power and conflict play in the internal operation of communities of practice. "Those with control over such resources can exert their power to create or remove barriers and boundaries which facilitate or inhibit participation" (Fuller, et al., 2005, p. 66).

An emerging focus of adult education is that of holistic learning. Holistic learning developed in part from critiques of Mezirow's transformative learning theory which I briefly outline next, before looking at Dirkx and Mackeracher's writings on this topic.

Transformative learning theory

Mezirow first introduced the concept of transformative learning in 1978 in an article entitled "Perspective Transformation", published in *Adult Education Quarterly*, based on a national study which looked at women returning to college. Mezirow's theory holds that transformative learning is a rational process, a metacognitive application of critical thinking in adults, which transforms acquired frames of reference by assessing epistemic assumptions. Transformative learning allows for frames of reference which are more inclusive, integrative, discriminating, reflective, open and emotionally able to change. However Mezirow has been criticised by, amongst others, Dirkx for focussing

on the cognitive and rational aspect of learning, and giving little recognition to the affective domain of learning. In a written dialogue with Dirkx, Mezirow acknowledges that transformative learning may occur outside awareness and may include emotional, intuitive, symbolic, imaginative and contemplative modes of learning (Dirkx, et al., 2006). I now discuss Dirkx's variant of transformative learning theory.

Holistic learning

This perspective of learning recognises that learning can be of the mind, body and soul. Descartes' emphasis on being through thinking, supported later in the eighteenth century by Enlightenment philosophers, is being questioned in the light of other forms of knowledge, "such as faith, tradition and authority" (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 189). Clark's view, in Clark and Dirkx (2008, p. 90), is:

> I think Descartes has a lot to answer for. The mind-body dualism that he set forth has become a fundamental assumption of Western thought, and it has wrought havoc and continues to do so, despite the challenges of feminist and postmodern thought.

What Clark is highlighting is that most theories that deal with how adults learn have focused on the rational and cognitive models. A developing conception of adult learning recognises the value of the affective domain. Extrarational models are now gaining currency. The role of feelings, intuition, spirituality, other ways of knowing, relationships, emotions, the non-conscious, implicit memory, and imagination are being examined to provide new notions of adult learning.

In a dialogue between Mezirow and Dirkx (Dirkx, et al., 2006) Dirkx presents an alternate view to Mezirow's strongly rational view of learning. Dirkx refers to this as soul, or inner, work. He holds that there are various ways of thinking about and understanding one's sense of self, and senses of identity and subjectivity. His view proffers a more integrated and holistic understanding of the subject where he acknowledges that there are intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual ways of being in the world. This view also accounts for ways in which social, cultural, embodied, deeply personal and transpersonal aspects of being play out in transformative learning. His point of departure from Mezirow's theory is on transformative *deep* learning, which he takes to mean how people challenge existing, taken-for-granted assumptions, notions and meanings of what learning is all about.

Dirkx examines our inner worlds which he describes as our private lives, the personal dimensions of our being. Further, he raises the issue of our varying levels of awareness of these inner worlds. This inner community of the self has multiple voices, and multiple identities, that can even present conflicting messages into the more conscious ways of being. This veiled and foggy inner community of the self can present as very personal and private thoughts, beliefs and values that none or few can access. Whilst we know them, or may be conscious of them, they shape and influence our being in the world. At the other end of the spectrum lies what Dirkx defines as our shadowy inner world: disjointed; fragmentary; difficult to understand dreams; spontaneous fantasies; deep feelings and emotions; where questions are volunteered without being asked; uninvited comments offered; and lies censor and judge, parent and child, trickster and deviant. (Dirkx, et al., 2006, p. 126)

Responding directly to Mezirow, Dirkx (Dirkx, et al., 2006, p. 137) writes:

> I consider our perspectives similar with respect to our mutual concern for transforming frames of reference that have either lost their meaning or usefulness to us or have in some way become dysfunctional. We are both interested in fostering enhanced awareness and consciousness of one's being in the world. You primarily emphasize epistemic beliefs, whereas I focus on unconscious emotional energies that seem to animate aspects of our perceptions of the world. You advocate a critically reflective approach to surfacing, analyzing, and potentially transforming epistemic belief structures. I suggest an imaginal approach to connecting and developing a conscious relationship with emotionally charged aspects of experience that remain unconscious and unavailable to everyday awareness. ... In the final analysis, I suggest we are seeking an integration of mind and soul.

Mackeracher raises the issue of soul and spirit in learning. Citing Davis and Tisdell, she defines spirit and spirituality as the feelings which extend beyond the normal limits of body and mind, transcendent, "of feeling connected to aspects of the external world that are of value to me – to others, to the earth, and to a greater cosmic being" (2004, p. 172), whereas soul is grounded in everyday messiness. Furthermore, "spirit arises from a need to transcend the messy conditions of life to find 'an expression of meaning that will take one up and out of the quagmire of actual experience'" (Moore, cited in Mackeracher, 2004, p. 172). In relating soul and spirit, Mackeracher sees soul as inward looking, pertaining to individuality, integrity, completeness and personal

substance, whereas spirit is outward looking, connected to relationships and realities beyond the body and mind. It is spirituality that gives meaning and purpose to life, and this spirituality comes from soul. In the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 4:12, Good News Bible) the writer distinguishes the soul and spirit as separate entities: "It [the word of God] cuts all the way through, to where soul and spirit meet, to where joints and marrow come together."

In the next section I explore an understanding of spirituality and religion as a dimension of soul learning.

Spirituality and religion

English (2000, p. 29) cites the work of Basil Yeaxlee who, as early as 1925, wrote that the spiritual aspect (which he conflated with religion) of adult education needed to be recognised more emphatically. Another pioneer in the field of adult education, Moses Coady, in 1939 held that education should serve spiritual as well as material needs, and that these needs should be "integrated into the whole of life" (English & Gillen, 2000).

Lindbeck (cited in Anderson, 1998) defines three approaches to religious education as cognitive, experiential-expressive and cultural-linguistic. In the first, the approach "gives the ways in which doctrines function as ... truth claims about objective realities", the second "interprets doctrines as noninformative and nondiscursive symbols of inner feelings, attitudes or existential orientations" and the final way, an amalgam of the first two, "provides a means for the critique of individualism, as well as balance between reason and sentiment, tradition and imaginative creativity, the social and the individual ... In this model doctrines function as 'communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action'" (Anderson, 1998, p. 179). Home group bible study therefore has a cultural-linguistic approach "in which both an individual and a social group find definition and develop" (Anderson, 1998, p. 180). Certainly during the time of observation of the home group bible study the programme followed by the group strongly questioned the truth claims of objective realities in the bible, and sought a "balance between reason and sentiment" (Anderson, 1998, p. 179).

English and Gillen's distinction between religion and spirituality is given: "Religion is based on an organized set of principles shared by a group, whereas spirituality is the expression of an individual's quest for meaning. Although religion and spirituality may

be connected, they are not necessarily so" (2000, p. 1), and they go further in saying that a religious person is not necessarily a spiritual one. It is also possible that some people experience spirituality in their religion or religious practice, for others their spirituality emerges from being immersed in a religious context, and for still others a religious upbringing in childhood may give rise to different spiritualities in adulthood, sometimes separate from their religious practices.

Tisdell (2008) separates the concepts of spirituality, a journey to wholeness; and religion, an organised community of faith. Whilst religion often shapes the earliest stage of spiritual development, and is often conflated with spirituality both in the definitions of the terms and in the literature, Tisdell is careful to point out that everyone has spirituality whilst not all have religion. In contending that "spirituality is currently a hot topic" (2008, p. 27) Tisdell highlights the influence of spirituality in those educating for social justice in multiple education settings including, I think, home group bible studies.

So what is meant by spirituality? An answer to this question is attempted in the next section.

Spirituality

The understanding of what spirituality is is wide-ranging and several have tried to pin its meaning down. Harris (cited in English & Gillen, 2000, p. 1) differentiates two, almost opposite, meanings of spirituality: one distinct in its removal from the world, and the other noted for its engagement in the world. For adult education purposes it is the latter meaning that is of interest.

The particular focus of this study is spirituality as it is situated in Christianity, not so much as a religious practice per se but in relation to meaning-making:

> Spirituality and the creative and imaginative techniques for eliciting its presence have a role to play in a more complete understanding of adult learning … While we have definitions of spirituality and conditions that might elicit it in an instructional setting, what we do not yet have is an understanding of or theoretical model of spiritual learning as we do, for example, with self-directed learning or transformative learning. (Merriam, et al., 2007, p. 207)

Whilst adult educators to date have focused on the aesthetic, social, emotional, physical, and intellectual dimensions of learning, the spiritual aspect has been largely ignored. English and Gillen argue that "to omit the spiritual dimension is to ignore the importance of a holistic approach to adult learning as well as the complexity of the adult learner" (English & Gillen, 2000, p. 2). Citing Vogel, English and Gillen (2000, p. 3) further develop this theme:

> An approach that honors the experience of each person and leaves room for mystery can lead to transformative teaching and learning ... [through] exploring our inner lives for insights that inform our questions and answers; tapping our spiritual lives in ways that are life giving, open to difference, and accepting of others; and recognizing that our spiritual lives are nurtured through story, tradition, ritual, hope, creativity, and imagination.

Merriam et al. (2007) conclude that there is a need for theory building in this particular dimension of adult learning. This study has the potential to generate such theory. There is little in the literature on learning in small groups where the purpose is spiritual development. This research seeks to uncover if, what and how participants learn in this context.

The small group bible study used as the case for this research is part of a Methodist Church congregation. In this final section I write about the theology of this church, and about the practice of home group bible study.

The theology of the Methodist Church

In the eighteenth century Charles and John Wesley, whilst students at Oxford, formed a small group whose purpose was to meet for prayer and bible study. The group, nicknamed 'the Holy Club', believed one should combine deep inward faith with a more practical service for those people in need. To this end, the group visited prisoners, the poor and the sick of the town. In setting about to live holy lives they met weekly in small groups, called classes, for the purposes of confessing their sins, supporting each other, and spending time in prayer and bible study. Mocked by fellow students for the ordered approach they adopted in their lives gave rise to many pejorative names, of which the "harmless name of Methodist" (ascribed to Charles Wesley, The Methodist Church of Great Britain, 2012) was adopted. Methodism is an evangelistic revival movement of the Anglican Church.

Wesleyan theology lies at the base of the Methodist Church's theology. It is believed that all can be saved through God's free grace and Methodist teaching is summarised as

> All need to be saved
>
> All may be saved
>
> All may know themselves saved
>
> All may be saved to the uttermost

Because no-one is beyond the reach of God's love, salvation is there for anyone who turns to God.

The Methodist Church believes in the headship of Jesus Christ, the Holy Scriptures, Divine revelation through Christ Jesus, Apostolic Faith, the principles of historical creeds, and in the Protestant Reformation. The church exists to spread Scriptural Holiness, and is both evangelical and sacramental. It observes two sacraments only: the sacrament of baptism, and the Lord's Supper.

Conference is the final authority within the church with regard to its doctrines and all questions concerning the interpretation of its doctrines.

The Methodist Church in Southern Africa

The Methodist Church of Southern Africa is a member church of the World Methodism Council, a movement of Protestant Christianity. Methodism in Southern Africa was introduced at various stages to the Western Cape (1814), Eastern Cape (1820) and Natal (1842) with the arrival of settlers or soldiers to the area. Each of these sites provided a springboard for the spread of Methodism into the interior of South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. In parallel with the establishment of Methodist missions amongst Europeans, Africans and Indians, was a strong tradition of lay evangelism. Between 1902 and 1925 Methodism was consolidated amongst all population groups and in all parts of the districts, with the Transvaal district joining later in 1931. Today, the Methodist Church of Southern Africa has missions in South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland and Mozambique.

The Methodist Church has a strong history of involvement in South Africa's socio-political affairs. It did not react to the Land Act of 1913 possibly because of the ambivalent attitude of their most influential, and senior, African member of Conference. However, the church was vocal in its opposition to the Colour Bar Act of 1925, and

segregation legislation introduced in 1926. The implementation of apartheid had major implications for the Church and its work. During the time of apartheid the church's boldest action was to elect the Reverend Seth Mokitimi President of the 1964 Conference, incurring the possibility of being declared black and thus deprived of its properties in white areas.

Another impact of the Methodist church in this region was the establishment of several schools and training institutions. By 1930 more than 84 000 pupils attended one of the 1 032 schools built and managed by the church. The most notable school was at Healdtown from where Nelson Mandela matriculated. Despite the Methodist church's long tradition of responding to inequities in the region, on its website it notes laconically: "Methodism has yet to discover its proper role in the political life of the new democracy" (The Methodist Church of Southern Africa, n.d.).

Bible study in the Methodist Church

Methodism originates in the formation of small groups, variously called bands, classes or societies. "The weekly class meeting has from the beginning proved to be the most effective means of maintaining among Methodists true fellowship in Christian experience" ("Resurrecting the classes. An introduction to cell church for Methodists," 2007, p. 1). It was through the mechanism of class meetings that people could be accountable to each other in living out their lives as Christians. In the webpage on small groups (The Methodist Church of Great Britain, 2012) is the statement: "The supportive small group has been found to be one of the most powerful ways for people to feel that they belong and to learn and grow."

Chapter 3 of the "Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church" deals with church membership. The following policy outlines the current practice of bible study in the Methodist church.

CLASS MEETINGS

    3.14   As membership in the Church also involves Christian community it is the duty of all members in the Church to seek to cultivate this in every possible way. The weekly Class Meeting, which includes Home Bible Study and Fellowship Groups, has from the beginning proved to be the

most effective way of maintaining true communion in Christian experience. It is intended to provide Christian community and instruction.

  3.15 Members should have their names entered in a Class Book and be under the Pastoral care of a Class Leader. They are expected, as far as possible, to contribute to the funds of the Church and to do some form of Christian service.
     (*The laws and discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa*, n.d., pp. 24-25)

Conclusion

The literature reviewed and critiqued in this chapter informs the theoretical framework for a study that explores the learning of six adult members of a home group bible study. This qualitative research draws on the theoretical base and educational philosophies of adult learning in the 21st century. First I reviewed literature pertinent to the development of adult education theories. I then expanded more on the characteristics and adult education theories that are significant in this case study of the non-formal learning activities of members of a home group bible study. I also briefly reviewed the history of adult learning in South Africa as it relates to its socio-political context. The literature on Methodism, Methodism in South Africa and fellowship or home group bible studies was also explored.

The theoretical framework for this study required that I situate non-formal learning activity in a bible study at the intersection of holistic learning within a community of practice. Holistic learning theories are in the nascent phase of their development, and this research can add to the knowledge base within adult education.

In the next chapter I discuss an explanation and rationale for qualitative research through case study methodology.

Chapter 3   Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore and generate knowledge about adult learning within the non-formal learning context of a home group bible study. The study focused on three couples within this home group. My study draws on the theoretical bases of social learning within a community of practice, as well as holistic learning theories. These theories have been more fully explored in Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework. This qualitative research study intends to address a shortcoming in the literature, as well as to answer the following research questions: what motivates participation in bible study, what is the nature and process of learning in this setting, and how does bible study impact personal development and interpersonal relationships?

This chapter presents an overview of the qualitative research paradigm, and case study design. Case study design is discussed in some detail, especially with regard to its fitness for purpose in exploring the research questions. In this chapter I will describe the method used in collecting data for this research, give an explanation of how the data was analysed, how consideration was given to measures of quality of the research, as well as a discussion of the limitations of this study. Ethical requirements and the role of the researcher are also examined.

In considering the design for this research deliberations centered on whether it should be quantitative or qualitative, or even a mixed methods approach. The purpose of quantitative research is to look for "statements of objective facts, prediction, generalisation and the establishment of law-like findings in tightly controlled research environments" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 60). However the intention of this research was to uncover and explore adult learning within the context of home group bible study, through investigating participants' thoughts, emotions, reflections and feelings within a natural setting. The "multiplicity and subjectivity of perspectives" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 60) meant that the best fit for this purpose was to use a qualitative design.

Qualitative research seeks to understand more about feelings, behaviour, social situations and experience through the eyes of the participants. Qualitative research is noted for its understanding of a particular situation, and in-depth enquiry (Rule & John, 2011). In this study the primary source of data was the members of the home group

bible study, and the means of data collection included observations of home group bible study, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. A qualitative case study offered the best fit-for-purpose in terms of methodology for this study.

Reasons for a case study methodology in educational research include exploring an issue within a limited focused setting, and generating understanding and insight through a thick, detailed description of the case in relation to its context. In the instance of this research, the most compelling features of case study research are its being embedded in a context and the means it offers to examine the interconnectedness of the parts of a bounded system. Case study research also seeks firstly to understand comprehensively the phenomenon under study and secondly to develop theory about the social structures and process (Becker, cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 29). Rule and John (2011) go on to say that in case study research the researcher's role is one of exploring what is going on in a particular instance within its natural state and context without trying to exert influence or control over the investigation.

I have selected case study methodology for this research into home group bible study because of its fitness for purpose. Home group bible studies are bound in time and space. The pedagogy is distinctive in that the participants attend voluntarily with the intention of studying the bible and engaging in dialogue. Participants are responsible to themselves and each other for creating shared meaning: there is no subject expert necessarily leading them to deeper understanding of meaning. There is a strong sense of a community of practice, where one of the practices is that of building relationships.

Case study methodology

In order to see into, and understand the context of the adult learner and their perceptions of what is or isn't learned at bible study, a case study presents the opportunity to richly describe this particular instance of learning.

Characteristics of case study research include being particularistic (focused on a particular phenomenon, event, programme or situation), descriptive ("rich and vivid description of events" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 253)) and heuristic (clarifying the reader's understanding of the situation being studied). The descriptive nature of case study research allows me to "show the influence of personalities on the issue, show the influence of the passage of time on the issue … obtain information from a wide variety

of sources … [and] present information … from the viewpoints of different groups"
(Merriam, 1998, pp. 30-31). Its heuristic nature allows for an explanation of the
background of the phenomenon. Each bible study participant will bring his or her own
learning experiences embedded in their theology, and socioeconomic and political
context. Again, the characteristics of case study research are well-suited to the
purpose of my intended research.

Gerring (2007, p. 37) pithily describes case study research as "an intensive study of a
single unit or a small number of units (the cases), for the purpose of understanding a
larger class of similar units (a population of cases)." He discusses in some detail four
attributes of case study research to do with research goals and four attributes that deal
with empirical factors. For the purposes of highlighting research designs that fit well
with case study research Gerring contrasts the attributes between case study and
large-N cross case study. In this next section I will not deal with the comparisons, but
foreground the features of case study research as it pertains to my proposed research.

In brief, Gerring holds that the research goals in case study have to do with hypothesis
generation (vs. hypothesis testing), internal validity (vs. external validity), study of
causal mechanisms (vs. causal effects), and deep (vs. broad) scope of proposition.
The empirical factors include drawing on a heterogeneous (vs. homogenous)
population of cases, strong (vs. weak) causal strength, rare (vs. common) useful
variation and concentrated (vs. dispersed) data availability. Gerring also lists two other
factors that impinge on research format, namely causal complexity and state of
research in the field, but holds that these factors are indeterminate in their implications
for research design. He is careful to say that the trade-offs between using one design
over the other are not invariant laws but should rather been seen as methodological
affinities.

In his explanation of the hypothesis generating component of case study research,
Gerring argues that case study has a conjectural affinity that should not be lightly
dismissed as luck, guesswork or inspiration. Indeed, it is this very aspect that allows
for the generation of new perspectives and conceptualisations. Case study has a
natural advantage in being exploratory in nature. He cites (amongst others) the case
study of Piaget's children, who were observed by their father as they moved from
learning as children into adulthood, as an instance where seminal ideas were created
from an intensive study of a small number of cases. Citing Ragin, (Gerring, 2007, pp.
40-41) Gerring writes "case study research is all about 'casing' – defining the topic,

including the hypothesis(es) of primary interest, the outcome, and the set of cases that offer relevant information vis-à-vis the hypothesis."

External validity is understood to mean that the findings from the sample under study can apply to the general, unstudied, population. Case study, by definition, cannot represent the broader unstudied population as this type of study makes no claims about generalisabilty to any wider unstudied population. Although case study research has weak external validity, its virtue is its internal validity. It is easier to examine the truthfulness of causal relationships within a small number of cases or a single case than for a larger number.

The third attribute is the consideration given by the researcher regarding the sort of insight into causation in which the goal may either be causal effect (the magnitude and consistency of the causal relationship) or identification of causal relationship. Gerring (2007, p. 45) goes on to say "case studies, if well constructed, may allow one to peer into the box of causality to locate intermediate factors lying between some structural cause and its purported effect" and, citing Glaser and Strauss, "in field work 'general relations are often discovered in vivo; that is, the field worker literally sees them occur'" (Gerring, 2007, p. 45). Case study research allows for an interrogation of intention, reasoning and information-processing practices of the participants in a given context, and thus allows the researcher to test causal implications of theory, "thus providing corroborating evidence for a causal argument" (Gerring, 2007, p. 45). Also, in investigating causal mechanisms, "the researcher is able to probe into detail which would be impossible to delve into, let alone anticipate, in a standardized survey. She may also be in a better position to make judgments as to the veracity and reliability of the respondent" (Gerring, 2007, p. 48).

The fourth and last attribute dealing with the goal of research has to do with the scope of the study. As has been stated before, a case study affords a depth (detail, completeness, richness, wholeness) of analysis which is different from a survey's broad scope. In detailing the specific features of an event a case study can explain the nuances of the why, when and how. This holistic approach to the social phenomenon examines behaviour in situ, in its natural settings.

Contrasting case study research with experiments and surveys, Bromley (cited in Merriam, 1998, pp. 32-33) writes that case studies, by definition, "get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings and desires), whereas experiments and surveys use convenient derivative data". In this case study of a home group bible study I was indeed able to get close to the subjects of interest, and particularly through accessing the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the participants.

The following characteristics offer further comparison with experimental and survey studies. Case study research is concerned with

- 'real' events, in 'real' contexts in 'real' time
- the meanings of events for the actors in the situation, as opposed to measuring behaviour or attitudes
- social processes and wider social functions that provide the context for such personal meanings
- the intelligent grasp of engagements in specific contexts rather than with the generation of findings or rules to be widely generalised
- making use of the widest range of techniques for gathering information, including quantitative data where possible and applicable
- participation to some degree by the researcher in the phenomenon being studied. (Millar, 1983, pp. 117-118)

Perry (2001) defines case research as an investigation into a dynamic and contemporary phenomenon with its emerging body of knowledge, within a real-life context in which the boundaries between the situation under investigation and the context are not clear, used when survey and experimental methods are not indicated in finding the causal links and lastly research that uses multiple sources of data. Millar suggests a framework based on three questions namely "What is the case about? How does the case work? Why does the case work in this way?" (Millar, 1983, p. 119). In considering other methodologies for this research none suited the purpose as well as case study research for the reasons described by Perry. In particular it is the delimitation of the object of study presented by Millar in looking to understand what really went on that makes this methodology appropriate.

Research design

The research design included preparation, implementation and analysis phases. During the preparation phase the case was identified and constructed, literature relevant to the case was read, and the means of collecting data were agreed and the tools refined. The unit of analysis was to be a bible study home group within the church where I worship, the focus of the study was to be non-formal, holistic adult learning in a community of practice, and the case is a case of bible study fellowship groups. The review of the literature included broad traditions of adult learning theories, the context of lifelong and lifewide learning, theories and critiques of communities of practice and holistic learning, adult education in the South African context, Methodism in general, the history and context of bible study in Methodism, and the role of the Methodist Church in South Africa.

The data collection phase took place at the end of one year and at the start of the following year. This included the observation of four weekly home group bible study sessions, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. The timing of this phase proved to be disruptive as many people in the group were either going on holiday at the end of the year, or at the start of the new year and one couple moved away from Johannesburg. It was several weeks before the home group bible study resumed their meetings at the beginning of the following year. Data collection and preliminary analysis of data was completed within five months.

Cohen et al. (2007) note that the nature of qualitative research results in the generation of large amounts of data, and they thus recommend that early analysis may reduce the overload of data through selecting significant features for the intended focus. Proceeding from a wide-angle lens to gather data, through a process of sifting, sorting, reviewing and reflecting to narrow the focus results in the emergence of the salient features of the situation. Later in the chapter I discuss the process of analysing data collected in this research.

Data collection

The choice of what and how data is amassed depends on many factors: the purpose of the study, the key research questions, research ethics and resource constraints. In planning the research the following sources of data were identified. It was planned that people would serve as a source of data, and that observations of several home group bible study sessions be conducted; all participants would be invited to reflect on their thoughts through journaling, and that three couples would be invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The programme notes, church notices and all documents relating to this particular fellowship group would also be analysed.

I informed the resident minister of my interest in conducting this research. According to the resident minister it was unnecessary to obtain permission from the church. He was very supportive and expressed an interest in the outcomes of this research. I approached the leader of a home group bible study to request that I observe their group, that the members consider writing self-reflective journals, and some of the group be interviewed. Much to the leader's surprise the group turned down my request. A second group agreed to meet with me first before making the decision to be involved in this research. At my first meeting with them they agreed that I could conduct research on their bible study home group, but that not all in the group would write journals. We agreed that I would not participate in the bible study, and that I would observe their interactions unobtrusively. All agreed that I could approach them with a request for an interview.

I sat in on two sessions as an orientation and pilot study. The purpose of doing this was to familiarise the group with my presence, orientate myself with respect to the group, group dynamics and to prepare field questions for later observation. At the second session letters of consent were handed to all the participants. All members returned their signed letters of consent, and these are stored with the university. Those who were willing to write self-reflective journals were handed a blank book in which to record their thoughts. As the journals contained personal reflections they were returned to the owners after copies of pages were made. I assured all members of the home group bible study that their anonymity as well as that of the church would be reserved. Participants were also informed that anyone could withdraw from the study at any stage and without any prejudice.

Thereafter I sat in on four sessions, and made field notes and audio recordings. The audio recordings were transcribed for analysis purposes. This bible study home group was following a programme *Living the Questions* which involved some preparation for each session. I also prepared for most of the sessions by reading through the programme notes in order to familiarise myself with the content, references and names used in the upcoming discussions.

I was unprepared for one session as I had not been given the programme notes, and this was to prove an extremely provocative session for me to observe. The content dealt with what was portrayed as the myth of the Christmas story and, more difficult for me to comprehend in the moment, the suggestion that there might be no virgin birth. Coming as it did with no warning for me, and my subsequent abrupt revision of my own meaning perspective, made the observation of this session very difficult. In my role as a non-participant observer it was bothersome that the group appeared to accept the news so calmly, and I became aware of how my silence and inability to talk frustrated my meaning-making of this new world-view.

Mindful of the caveat issued by Cohen et al. (2007) regarding the volume of data collected in qualitative research, and when I was no longer seeing new themes emerging from my observations I then moved into a phase of interviewing three couples from this home group. Couples were selected purposefully as I wanted the opportunity to ask each partner if they noted any changes in their partner as a result of discussions, or revisions of world-views arising out of bible study.

Each of the six people was interviewed separately once, and then together, over a period of two months. These interviews were audio-recorded and field notes made, except for one of my first interviews where the recording device failed, unbeknown to me. However, using the interview schedule and memory I immediately made notes of the interview. Five of the six people interviewed submitted their journals to me, and for certain key facts I was able to probe more deeply during the interview sessions into the meaning of what they meant, and why they had written their comments.

Lincoln and Guba, as cited by Cohen et al. (2007), discuss the collection of data from non-human sources, which include documents and records, and unobtrusive informational residues such as artefacts, physical traces and various other records. I used journal entries (where provided by the participants), weekly church notices, sermon preparation notes supplied by the church office, and website and other notices published by the church. I also used the programme notes from the *Living the Questions* programme followed by this bible study home group for the period under observation.

Data analysis

Le Compte and Preissle (cited in Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 184) make the point: "a major feature of qualitative research is that analysis commences early on in the data collection process so that theory generation can be undertaken". Following each interview the audio-recording was transcribed, and together with field notes and observation notes made, items were clustered around emerging themes. The observation schedules and recordings of the home group bible study sessions proved useful in providing a context of what happened during the fellowship meetings, but it was in the analysis of the semi-structured interviews that themes began to emerge. Transcriptions of audio-recordings, together with notes from observation schedules were read through several times to determine themes with regard to answering research questions.

Rule and John (2011) see the process of interpreting the case as a means of answering the question "What does the case mean?" Situating data analysis as a highly creative and intellectual process, they define interpretation of the case as working the data to find patterns of meaning. Cohen et al. (2007) recommends following a seven step framework during the analysis phase. It begins with setting out units of analysis, then creating a 'domain analysis'. The next step looks to establishing relationships and linkages between the domains. Speculative inferences are made, and are then summarised. Negative and discrepant cases are sought, and finally a process of theory generation is embarked on. Rule and John's (2011) chapter on "Interpreting the case" outlines the steps of this framework clearly and pragmatically, and is discussed in the following paragraphs.

During the case interpretation phase of the research process thick descriptions are constructed, themes identified, explanations of thought and action are advanced, and the case is theorised. Rule and John recommend that the first step in qualitative data analysis is to manage, monitor, prepare and store the data through a systematic organisation of the data. Working the interview data first required that the recorded interviews be transcribed, a process I outsourced once I realised that 10 minutes of recording time took me three hours to transcribe. Once I received the transcriptions I checked them for accuracy against the recordings. The transcriptions were printed with large margins and in double spacing to allow me to add notes and to assign codes.

Coding is in itself a lengthy and arduous task. It entailed a reiterative process of assigning labels to different parts of the data, listening and reading again, and reassigning the codes. Rule and John make the point that "coding requires intelligent, analytic and systematic decisions about 'what the data is saying'" (2011, p. 77), as well as providing an opportunity to get close to the data.

Rule and John (2011) next discuss three approaches of analysing interview and text-based data: through content and thematic analysis, or discourse analysis, or narrative analysis. Discourse analysis focuses on the symbolic use of language, such as imagery and metaphor; whilst narrative analysis is particularly suited to data generated through autobiographical and life-history methods. The most natural approach to use in this study was thus content and thematic analysis. I worked with the codes looking for similarities, differences and code absences in order to group into categories. Data analysis began with reading through the journals, transcripts of observed sessions and transcripts of interviews several times. This was done to develop an impression of what made sense by way of developing concepts, or what emerged as exciting insights. I also referenced Chapter 2: Literature review and theoretical framework to ensure that I remained mindful of the theory. I also looked for responses to the key research questions, and on a mindmap began to cluster answers around emerging themes and categories.

Analysis of the categories and resolving these into patterns led to the generation of themes. Moving from the raw data to thematic analysis resulted in increasing levels of abstraction in order to create analytic models and generate theory.

In using documents as a source of data, the documents were first organised in a file, and then read through once in order to obtain a sense of what they contained. Rule and John make the point that the documents need to be read and reread and, depending on the purpose of reading, may be read for relevance or to identify gaps in the set of documents; for an overall understanding of the case, identifying major themes and issues, confirming or triangulating data from other sources, contradiction of findings from other sources; or for identifying field questions to be pursued in further data collection. Documents serve as symbolic representations of the people or organisation they belong to, and thus provide access to the cultural milieu of the case.

Cohen et al. (2007, p. 202) provide a "formidable series of questions ... to be addressed" in analysing documents. These are summarised under headings: the context of the document; the writer of the document; and the researcher and the document. The questions are intended to examine the reliability and validity of the documents. As social products embedded within a certain context, documents need to be interrogated and interpreted, not taken at face value. Cohen et al. (2007) suggest that placing the documents where they lie on several continua will also assist the researcher in answering the long list of questions. Continua include: formal or official to informal or lay; published to unpublished; public domain to private papers; anonymous to authored; facts to beliefs; professional to lay; and for circulation to not for circulation. In this study the documents used were the programme notes and journals. In the case of the journals these were classified as informal, unpublished, private domain, authored, statements of beliefs and emotions, lay documents and not for circulation. In the case of the programme notes these were classified formal, published, public domain, co-authored but not ascribed, beliefs, professional and for circulation.

Trustworthiness of the research

Rule and John (2011) take a broad view of the entire research process that ensures research quality. They suggest that the researcher "consider and plan for quality throughout the research process" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 104). These considerations include both procedural processes, such as data collection and analysis, and development and maintenance of relationships with people that make the research possible. They list seven dimensions during the research process to note with regard to quality of the case. These begin with the conceptualisation of the case and case study, particularly the clarity, inventiveness and imagination of the case. Secondly,

attention must be given to the development of the research purpose and questions, focusing on clarity, coherence and significance. The third dimension highlights relationships, more especially ethics, respect, trust and reciprocity. In the fourth instance attention falls on data collection, where cognizance must be taken of sources, methods, instruments, thoroughness, depth and comprehensiveness. During the analysis of data phase, quality is assured through trustworthiness and triangulation. In the penultimate phase of qualititative research, during the engagement with theory, coherence, consistency and appropriateness are the hallmarks. Finally, in presenting the data, accuracy, creativity and relevance provide measures of quality.

The choice of methodology should be guided by the principle of fit for purpose, and my research purpose looked to generate in-depth, holistic and situated understanding of adult learning in a bible study home group. "A case study reflects a considered choice to study the singular with the explicit intention of gaining understanding of the particularity of the case" (Stake, cited in Rule & John, 2011, p. 105). As an alternative to reliability and validity, Guba has offered the concept of trustworthiness of the case (Rule & John, 2011). This approach honours scholarly rigour, transparency and professional ethics as a means of gaining levels of trust and fidelity within the research community. Trustworthiness may therefore be measured by alternative measures of quality such as transferability (the case resonates with other cases familiar to the reader), credibility, dependability and confirmability.

Rule and John elucidate Guba's alternate concept of trustworthiness of the case by first examining the key values in this approach. Transferability has emerged as an alternative to generalisability. "By providing thick descriptions of the case and its context, the researcher allows her findings and conclusions to gain a level of transferability which the reader may determine" (Rule & John, 2011, p. 105). In developing the concept of credibility Guba means the extent to which the case study has recorded the fullness and essence of the reality in the case. This can be compared with what is known as internal validity in quantitative research, the measure of what the research set out to study. As an alternative to reliability Guba offers dependability. He sees this concept as dispensing with the positivist notions of replication, and focusing instead on methodological rigour, coherence with regard to generating findings and accounts of the case that can be confidently accepted by the research community. Whilst objectivity is honoured in the positivist tradition, Guba offers the concept of confirmability as a means to deal with researcher bias and subjectivity. Methodological rigour was ensured through my being "*in situ* long enough

to see things happening repeatedly rather than just once" (Spindler & Spindler, cited in Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 181), and through using interviews and writings in the journals of the subjects themselves.

Rule and John (2011) give some practical steps that can be followed to ensure trustworthiness in a case study. They outline what it means to craft a thick description, verify accounts with respondents, create an audit trail, and use critical peer checks. In the case of my study the thick description is the result of using the words of the participants as they were spoken during the observed sessions, and as recorded during the semi-structured interviews, as well as the written words of the participants who kept a journal. The recordings were transcribed and, in the case of one-on-one and one-on-couple interviews, were checked for completeness and veracity by the interviewees. I conducted checks on the transcriptions of the observed sessions by listening to the recordings made, and checking the transcription. The recordings of the interviews and the transcriptions have been stored at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, as have photocopies of the journal writings. Peer checks were conducted during supervision sessions.

The process of triangulation is another means of ensuring high quality, respectable and rigorous research. Triangulation refers to the process of using multiple sources and methods to support findings generated in the case study. Using a diversity of methods or sources strengthens the internal validity through eliminating bias introduced by reliance on single sources, methods, theories or researchers (Rule & John, 2011). Van der Mescht, as cited by Rule and John, sees triangulation not so much as a verification process but rather as the means to create a fuller picture. If the researcher's interest is to get to the lived reality and meaning-making process of social actors, and to feel experiences from their point of view, then looking for additional actors, or drawing on data from different sources, or using different methods allows the researcher to broaden her perspective. Triangulation through drawing on data from multiple sources (observation, semi-structured interviews, journal entries) ensured the quality of the case.

Once a multiplicity of sources and methods has been employed Rule and John (2011) suggest that an end to data collection is signaled by data saturation, the realisation that no new insights are emerging in the additional data. In order to deal with the multiplicity of views and data generated through using multiple sources and methods, Rule and John cite Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit's (2004) approach of

crystalisation that recognises that additional facets are thus revealed.

I observed two bible study sessions, without recording or making field notes, in order to ensure that my observation schedule was sufficient to record the data I was interested in collecting. Thereafter I observed four further sessions taking field notes and making audio-recordings until I felt that no new insights were emerging. I then interviewed each of six people individually to probe more deeply into what I had observed, and into what they had written in their journals. Following this first round of interviews, I then interviewed them as couples. This was done so that I could probe into an 'outsider's' view of how home group bible study impacted their world-views and behaviours.

Other sources of information included the programme notes and documents published by the local church.

Role of researcher

Cohen et al. (2007, p. 171) note that "researchers are in the world and of the world", and that they bring their own biographies into the research situation. In addition participants behave in certain ways in their presence. For all its careful design, research is not a neutral affair. "Reflexivity suggests that researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research, seeking to understand their part in, or influence on the research" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 171). As researcher effects cannot be eliminated, the researcher should be highly "aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and inductive processes and paradigms shape the research" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 172).

When I made my request to conduct research in this group, not many members of this home group bible study knew me, or knew of me. However, I attend church frequently and am part of a fairly small congregation so fellow congregants know each other by sight. I thus held an insider position with regard to fellow worship, but an outsider position with regard to home group bible study in general and in particular to this fellowship group. Over the period of observation and data collection I was initially peripherally engaged with the group members, but over time experienced feelings of inclusiveness and relationship building.

Limitations

This research does not examine different Christian denominations or other religions' communities of practice, which remains a limitation of this study.

Christian worship is wide ranging and culturally specific. In its global practice there are many socioeconomic and political influences on the practice of bible study. Often the context may provide the purpose for bible study. Even within a national context there are regional differences, differences between the worship practices in rural and urban settings, differences amongst the different language groups, and differences in the theology as practiced by the church. My context, personal faith practices and beliefs may impact the interpretation of my data.

Case study research is not intended to be generalisable, so the full story of learning within the context of a small group bible study is limited. However, the purpose of this study was to foreground the human aspect, and thus not to generalise to the entire population. A further purpose was to add to the knowledge base and to address some of the lack in adult learning literature, and to provide a means to contextualise other studies.

Practical limitations include the availability of participants for interviews (interviews can be time consuming) and interviewer fatigue. To overcome this I planned to target one bible study home group, and within that group make requests of three couples for interviewing. Interviewer fatigue was avoided through holding the minimum number of interviews required, limiting the length of each interview, planning the interview questions so that they were logical to the interviewee, and having items that were brief, simple and clear. In addition I conducted a maximum of two interviews per week.

The very nature of this bible study is relationship building. Over time the group began to include me in their concerns and prayers. My role as a dispassionate observer therefore lessened over time.

Despite providing prompts for the writing of journal entries, not everyone used these in the way intended, sometimes writing down their reflections a week later, and rarely using the journal to reflect their own meaning perspective revisions. I had intended to surface reflections on how the group had contributed to their learning or meaning revision, and did not necessarily get these specific insights. This may be owing to the

fact that the group members all know each other well, and that they feel that "the nice thing about being old is that 'stuff' no longer matters" (Mary), or "we no longer sweat the small stuff" (Rebecca). I used the interview sessions to probe some of the reflections made in the journal entries.

Although the group felt that my presence was unnoticeable and in no way intrusive, my unobtrusive observation meant it was not always easy to read body language. I have used the observation schedule to note moments of silence, and who kept silent during the session. Also I chose to focus on and give priority to relationships between me and those whom I interviewed, so some quality was compromised here. Sometimes the interviews took place in noisy places, and sometimes the interviewee was dealing with other pressing matters, and was thus interrupted during the interview. I have noted where interruptions occurred.

The closing session of this bible study programme was facilitated by the resident minister, at the group's request, so that they could deal with what Mezirow (2000b) terms epochal transformations in habit of mind. These are sudden dramatic reorientating insights: emotionally exacting transformations that "involve a critique of previously unexamined premises regarding one's self" (Mezirow, 2000a, pp. 21-22). I was unable to attend this session owing to personal circumstances and, with permission of all who attended, made a recording and transcription of this.

Ethical considerations

Ethical behaviour is described by Cohen et al. (2007) as taking into account the effects of research on participants and to act in such a way as to preserve their dignity as human beings. Ethics reflect the rules and norms of acceptable behaviour, and flow from a system of moral principles embraced by a specific community (Rule & John, 2011). The practices of researchers are governed and guided by research ethics which have been developed and assumed by a community of scholars. The researcher must familiarise herself with the specific requirements and processes required by the institution in order to conduct ethical research. Part of this practice is that researchers must apply for ethical clearance from the academic institution before embarking on a study. This has been complied with (see preliminary page iv).

Briefly, ethical research requires autonomy (personal autonomy should not be compromised by the research), non-maleficence (the researcher causes no harm during the study), and beneficence (research should aim to contribute to public good). In practice these principles were acknowledged and adhered to. Regarding autonomy I have ensured the privacy, confidentiality and anonymity of the participants in the bible study home group. I have been transparent with the purpose of my research, and ensured that the church both knows about, and supports, this research. No deception was used to secure participation. To ensure non-maleficence, at all stages in the research process the participants, the bible study home group and community were not maligned or harmed in any way. No judgment regarding world-views of, or beliefs held by, participants were passed or made. With respect to the principle of beneficence, at the conclusion of the research the bible study home group was invited to a follow up meeting where the findings of the research were discussed and celebrated.

The participants in this research were adults who were asked deeply personal and probing questions about their faith life. In order to be transparent about the purpose of the study I ensured that permission was obtained through the official channels (church body and home group bible study leader). Participants were invited to contribute to the study on the understanding that they were free to withdraw for any reason, and that they would not be identified but remain anonymous. The data was dealt with confidentially. The members were informed that they would have access to the transcripts and would be able to edit the transcripts for accuracy and that they could see a copy of the research once completed, and that the data would be placed on record with the university for a period of five years. I was open and honest about the intentions and conditions under which the study was carried out. Each participant signed an informed consent form (appendix 2).

Chapter 4   Findings

Introduction

Learning is not only about relying on mental abilities for rational, verbal thought, but also acknowledging "our considerable capacities for physical, emotional, intuitive, relational and spiritual learning" (Griffin, cited in Mackeracher, 2004, p. 127). This study on how adults learn in a non-formal small home group bible study, based on social constructivist explanations of learning, draws on the theories of Lave and Wenger's (1991) Community of Practice, and Dirkx (2000, 2001), English (2000) and Tisdell's (1999, 2008) holistic learning.   The research focuses on how members of this community of practice seek to further develop their faith in practice, and in so doing draws on emotional, relational and spiritual dimensions of learning.

A report *Communities of Practice: A new tool for Government managers* by Snyder and Briggs (2003) proposes a means by which civic structures and federal government in the United States can cooperate in "collaborative action-learning networks" or communities of practice in order to further national priorities. Pertinent to my research is that Snyder and Briggs view communities of practice as stewards of "the knowledge assets of organizations and society", but furthermore that these communities also operate as "social learning systems" (Snyder & Briggs, 2003, p. 7). Snyder and Briggs hold that these informally constituted structures are not mandated from the outside: rather they are marked by voluntary participation. They cite the following as characteristic of communities of practice: willingness to seek or share knowledge; the building of trust; reciprocity and application of knowledge in practice. In this chapter I will show how the members of the home group bible study learn in a community of practice. Their voluntary participation in an informally constituted structure is remarkable for its levels of trust and support. There is also rich evidence of the many ways they apply their knowledge in practice, and their continued search for knowledge and meaning.   Some of the members are also expert stewards of the knowledge assets of the Methodist Church.

Although the members of the home group bible study acknowledge that the reason for participating in this non-formal learning activity is to gain a deeper understanding of the bible, with a focus on rational and cognitive learning, there is scant recognition given by them to the more holistic learning dimension that they demonstrate in practice. In this chapter, as I analyse how the members of this bible study group learn, the emotional,

relational and spiritual dimensions of learning in this community of practice will be brought to light.

This chapter presents the findings as a developing story, and offers interpretation through related theory where applicable. This presentation is typical of a case study which aims to present rich, thick accounts of the phenomenon. First I set the context by describing the participants, their history as a group and the bible study programme they followed. The six participants in the study are introduced to get a sense of the people involved and how they define themselves with respect to their participation in home group bible study. The history of this bible study home group is then described insofar as it impacts the identity and learning of the group members in particular. At the time of collecting the data the bible study home group was completing a study programme called *Living the Questions*. This programme is described, along with some of the participants' reflections on the impact of this particular bible study.

Next, I describe the findings from the data collected during the research, focusing on three areas: I discuss more about what motivates the participants to become involved in a bible study; then illustrate how they understand the purpose and nature of their learning; and lastly I depict how this learning impacts the manner and way they consequently live their lives, the Word-World relationships.

Description of participants

Participants in the study are members of a home group bible study based in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg who belong to a Methodist congregation. This bible study group has a long, rich history of nearly 30 years, with few participants remembering how the group was initially constituted and for how long they have been meeting. At the time of this study there were eleven active members and one member was in the process of relocating to a new province. The group comprised five men and seven women of whom nine are white, one black and two mixed race. One member is in her 30s, the remainder is approaching retirement or has been retired for several years. Five are still actively employed. Two members, a wife and husband, recently moved to their place of retirement at the coast. Two other fellow-worshippers in the same congregation left the bible study in the last couple of years as their personal circumstances now make it difficult to attend the evening sessions. Both, however, are invited to join in the social celebrations of the group, and one still meets with some

members of the group for a 'catch-up'. Both were integral members of this bible study. Figure 2 below presents all the pseudonyms and relationships within this church's community.

Broader Church Community
Richard - incumbent resident minister
Peter (previous resident minister) married to group member Tamar (deceased)
Ian – resident minister in another church
Monica Larkin – a former group leader
Anne – previous leader
Margaret – leads Spiritual Formation group in Church
Pretty – runs Riverside Child Care and Support

Previous group members
Martha Basson (deceased) married to Luke Basson
Benjamin Byrne partial participant (deceased) married to Martha (now Basson)
Tamar (deceased) married to Peter (previous resident minister)

Home group study pa...
Eve
Matthew
Luke Basson married to Martha (previously Byrne)
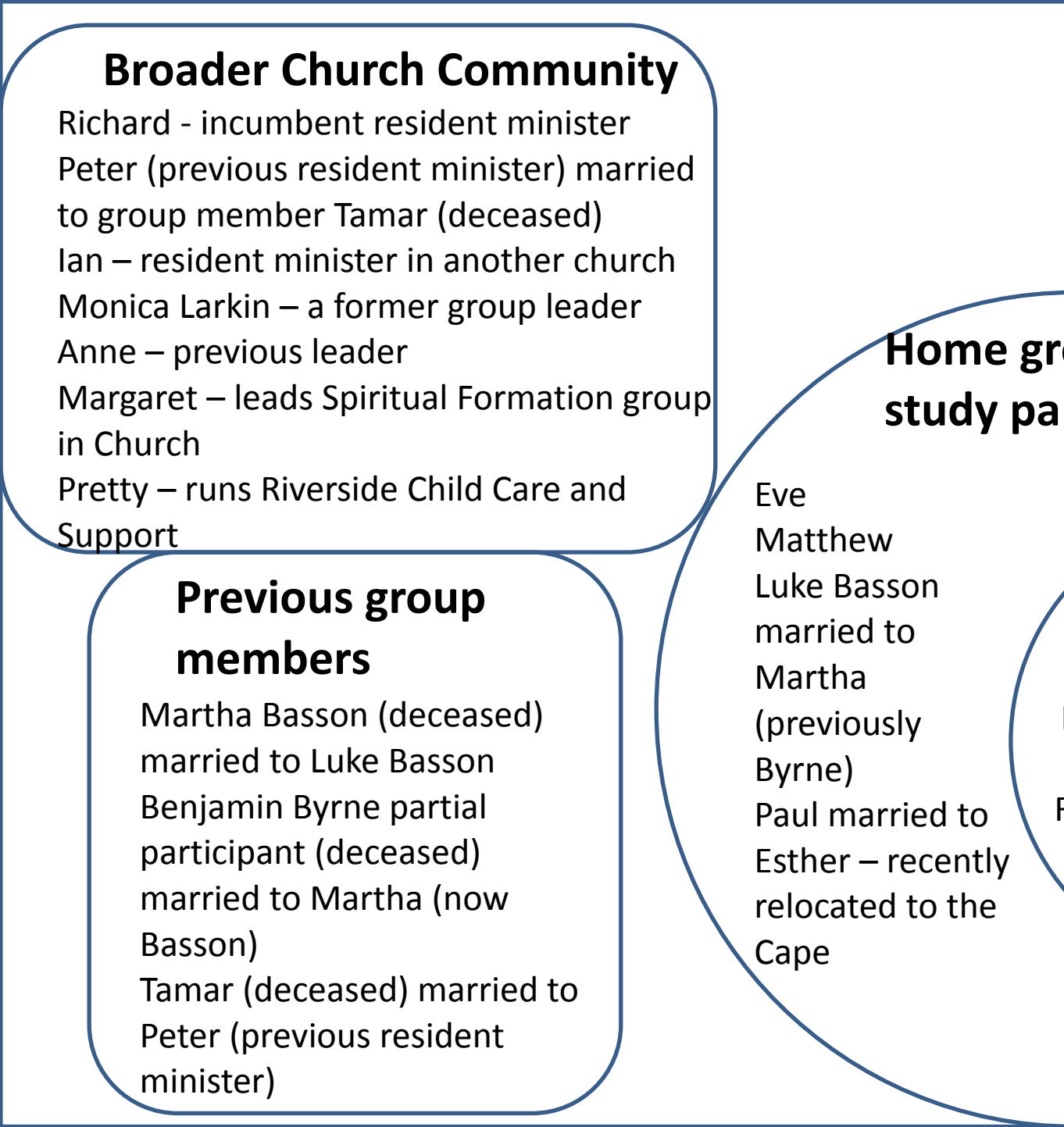Paul married to Esther – recently relocated to the Cape

Figure 2: Relationships between various members of this community

From the group of twelve people, six were selected for semi-structured interviews and, of these, five wrote reflections of their learning in a journal. It is these six people, identified by pseudonyms as: Rebecca and her daughter Rachel; Ruth, the home group

leader, and her husband John; Mark and his wife Mary who comprise the case. The remaining members of the group were often referenced during the interviews, and are identified by the pseudonyms Eve, Matthew, the recently relocated Paul and his wife Esther, and Luke and his wife Martha. In describing the history of this bible study group mention is made of leaders of other (historic) groups who are identified as Anne and Monica. From the broader church community Richard is the current resident minister, and Margaret leads the Spiritual Formation team at the church. Pretty is part of the congregation and runs Riverside Child Care and Support (name disguised). Ian is a resident minister of another Methodist church, and led the "Manna and Mercy" programme at the home church over one Lent. Peter is a previous resident minister of this congregation whose wife Tamar was also a member of this bible study group. Tamar was one of three people either in or close to the group who died of cancer within a relatively short period of time. Luke's first wife Martha, called by the group Martha Number One and a participant of the home group, also died of cancer. The third person who died was the husband of Martha (called Martha Number Two) Byrne. Martha Byrne (Martha Number Two) is now married to Luke Basson.

In providing a description of the case study members, the remaining home group members, the broader church community and those involved historically in the group, one of the dominant patterns of this case begins to emerge: that of the significance of relationships within and outside of the group, and links over space and time with others.

I now provide a thick and rich description of the six people who comprise the case.

Case study participants

Rebecca and Rachel

Rebecca is a retired nursing sister who has been part of this particular bible study for many years. She also attends a second afternoon bible study at the church led by Richard, the resident minister. She is the mother of Rachel, who participates with her in this bible study. She reads widely and deeply:

Oh, I read a lot of stuff. At the moment I am reading a book about a guy who was brought up in Johannesburg. I read a lot of stuff. I read my bible of course, I read a

lot of art books, and I bought a book on George Eliot on the sale. And I read bible studies for information, art books for information and to relax. And I read magazines when going to bed. So it depends on what I am wanting when I read my books.

According to Ruth (group leader), Rebecca plays a significant role in researching future studies for the group to consider: "Rebecca is very good at that; she has got more time than some of us and she is good at browsing and bringing things along." This is borne out by Rebecca's daughter Rachel who says "No, I don't [get involved with selecting a bible study], but my mom does, and she makes quite an effort to go and find a good study. And I like what she selects." Rachel, Rebecca's daughter, is the youngest member of the group. Rachel and Rebecca drive together to attend the bible study, although when Rachel was writing examinations at the end of 2011, Rebecca then came to the bible study on her own. Rachel is a Chartered Accountant who recently re-qualified as a primary school teacher. She is married with two young sons, and is not formally employed at present. Rachel is involved in the church through teaching Sunday School. She says,

Well, I am a bit different because I do like to chop and change. If I could I would like to try a new bible study, and that is just the way I am; I mean I am like that with my jobs, I have just changed! If I was [teaching] in a school in Grade 1 this year I would want to do Grade 2 next year. That is how I am; I just enjoy the experience of moving all the time. And different bible studies have different things to offer and I would quite like to just flitter around all the time. ... But as a younger person I do feel a little bit different…

Mary and Mark

Mary is married to Mark, and together they have been members of this bible study for what Mary describes as "I can't remember how long". Mary and Mark have three married adult sons and grandchildren. They have lived in several towns and provinces in South Africa, but moved to Johannesburg in 1988 at which time they joined this particular congregation, and a bible study fellowship group. Mary, a retired secretary and afterschool carer, works in the afternoons at two different primary schools in the area offering support to young children in getting their homework complete. Mary also teaches Sunday School at the church. Mark is a retired banker who has worked in the housing sector. During his active working life he was involved in community projects

building classrooms in Grahamstown through the Bantu Affairs Administration Board under the auspices of the Round Table (a charity organisation). This marked the beginning for him of both a political and social awareness. When Mark and Mary moved to East London, Mark continued his relationship with the Grahamstown community leaders "and then through the church, continued to meet with them and then we had various programmes throughout the church down there." Mark describes some of the details of the various programmes:

> It wasn't only through the work and we had to try and find soft landings for people who had their houses repossessed by the banks, and so we dealt with the issues of unemployment and illness and death, and all sorts of things. So we did some programmes of job creation and then when I retired it was a deliberate strategy to break with what I was doing but to continue with some of those programmes.

Mark currently works with one of his sons in leading tours in Soweto and Johannesburg. He is presently involved with a youth development programme in Soweto, a project supported by the congregation of the home church.

Ruth and John

Ruth is the leader of this home group bible study and is married to John. She is a university lecturer, having worked in adult literacy NGOs and high schools. She is both involved in the activities of the church as a member of the Worship Team, a Fellowship Group Leader, and leader of the Justice and Service team; and in mission work as Chairperson of an interdenominational team of churches working together in operating a weekly feeding scheme and clinic, Operation Relief and representative for an HIV/AIDS organisation (Riverside Child Care and Support). John is a retired journalist and war correspondent, but now involved in photography and making videos. He is also part of the Justice and Service, and Worship teams in the Church, and supports Riverside Child Care and Support and Operation Relief. Ruth and John were part of another home group bible study and, at the time of the emergence of this new group, were co-leaders of the new entity. Recognising that Ruth was better able and positioned to lead the group, John stepped back from his leadership role. He explained, "So it made a lot of sense for Ruth to take over, and I think she has been successful with it; she is always remarkably diligent with it."

Having introduced the participants in the home group bible study and the people in the broader church community, the next section deals with how this fellowship group originated and has developed its identity.

History of the bible study group

This bible study group has a long history, and some members can trace its roots back nearly 30 years. Mark and Mary moved from another province to Johannesburg in the late 1980s, and Mark's recollection of where the home group bible study started was that of being a member of another group:

> When we first joined Anne (a previous leader) was in the group. We stayed with [Anne's] group through its ins and outs. The group has changed in character over time. Then [Anne's] group folded, and a new group incorporated with Ruth's. One member and his family moved to the UK, and the Kenyan or Caribbean family moved to Zambia. Now our current group is notable for its strong fellowship, rather than its being 'spiritual'. They [the members of the group] have been supportive throughout significant life transitions.

Here Mark gives his views on how he perceives this group's identity. In a powerful statement he foregrounds the importance of relationship over that of the practice of being spiritual. His reflection on the group members' support through significant life transitions includes that of supporting those members who faced terminal illness; offering support to the remaining partners; and supporting the marriage of two widowed members of the group to each other. In a later part of this chapter Mark mentions that this support takes the form of praying for each other, and for family and friends of group members; and through offering financial support when required.

Mary remembers the formation of the home group bible study as "this one I think ended up being a bit of a mixture of a couple of bible studies. So … they then moved away and we joined this one, but it wasn't quite run the same way, because we were with somebody else, Monica Larkin (a previous leader), and then we moved to Ruth's."

Ruth (the group leader), too, speaks of the changing nature of the group and its membership:

… the group, I mean there's no … I mean you can't really think of the current group as *the group*, because there is nobody in that group, in the existing group, that was in the group that John (Ruth's husband) and I first joined. … and some people have emigrated, or moved within the country and so on. So there is nobody in the current group that was in the group that we were first part of.

Thus in the current home group bible study some members have come from other groups that amalgamated into this one, and over time new members have joined and others have left. However the participants who now constitute the group have a long and rich shared story. Wenger (1998) writes about how some communities of practice may be seen by an observer as forming a constellation. He lists nine reasons why a constellation may form, and pertinent to this study is the sharing of historical roots, having members in common, facing similar conditions and having overlapping discourses.

The terminal illness and death of three people close to or in the group plays a highly significant role in how the members identify themselves and the group. Rebecca (Rachel's mother) tells of the group's evolution. She says "It hasn't changed much, people have moved away and some have died. Luke's wife died, his first wife died. And Esther moved away [to retire]." In her journal Rebecca writes about her acute feelings about absence in the group. Supporting this further she says, "You still remember that they were there and that [they] have gone. You get very close to people."

Ruth remembers this period:

Other people who were key in that group include three people who died. So we had a period in our group when we were really very concerned with being a support to people who were really seriously ill. So there was Luke's first wife, no … first of all there was … I am trying to think of the order of things, probably Peter's wife, Tamar – because when he was our minister Tamar was in our home group, and Martha's first husband, Benjamin; and Luke's first Martha. So we had several years of always having one or more person in our group who was seriously ill. Benjamin wasn't ever really much involved directly with the group; he travelled a lot for work and was really, really busy, but Martha always was [involved in the group]. Martha Number Two. Martha Number One, Luke's first wife she was also very involved too, and Tamar was very involved. So we always carried on with study but we also had a sort of major role in being there for the people there who were struggling. And by the

time we had coped as a group with the third death, we actually got a grief counsellor in to work with all of us as a group.

Ruth's recounting of asking a grief counsellor to help the members of this community of practice make sense of what they had experienced points to the occasional need for the practice to bring in new expertise where no such mastery exists. This also happened during the time of my study when the resident minister was asked to attend the closing session of the *Living the Questions* study programme. Wenger (1998, 2000, 2006) and Lave and Wenger (1991) and journal articles on communities of practice do not seem to reference such a phenomenon. The closest term I found is "external expert", but Wenger does not use this term (except in the sense of using an expert to advise consultants). It appears to be used in workplace communities of practice for such purposes such as knowledge management, intellectual capital and e-learning contexts. It refers to the practice of bringing in an outsider to 'train' the participants for a particular purpose. This seems to be a manipulation of a community of practice as these communities are not always informally developed, but appears to be a management tool to achieve a certain purpose. It is interesting to note that when the practice feels the need to clarify their thinking or to help them with an aspect of meaning making, and no such mastery exists in the practice to assist, they then call in new expertise. The expert stays with the group for a short while and then exits the practice. The literature on communities of practice is often based on workplace practice, and so a difference in how and why the expert is used can be seen. In the case of the home group bible study an expert is called in to satisfy a felt-need of members, whereas in workplace situations the expert may be used for training purposes identified by the organisation.

John (Ruth's husband) further explains this phase of the group's history:

It is about 28 years or so … Ja, and it has been very important to us because in the past ten years we have lost three members of the group, all of them to cancer, and within a short period too, within about three or four years, and because it is such a close-knit group, it absolutely devastated us and we actually had to get in counselling to help us over this. But because we have been through these things – I mean Luke lost his wife to cancer, Martha his wife [now] lost her husband to cancer, and then Peter, who was our minister, his wife joined our group and we lost her to cancer. So it has meant a very tight-knit group. It is never very easy to get over

these things but I think membership of the group has helped the remaining partners very substantially in keeping going.

Mary (Mark's wife) remembers this chapter in the life of the group as:

> … in that time we had Martha's first husband die on us. They were both part of our group; Martha Byrne (Martha Number Two) then, and then we had Luke's wife, Martha Basson (Martha Number One), we went through the whole cancer thing with them and then she died on us. But in the middle of it, Tamar, the wife of our minister then, she was part of our group and my very good friend. And she got diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and she died on us. So I mean it is surprising that we didn't all leave! We became a hugely supportive group. It was fine. I mean, I can't say it was great, but I mean we were all so supportive and every week there would be reporting. I think Peter (Tamar's husband and the then resident minister) wasn't part of the group, just Tamar. I suppose in a way we all supported each other through it, and certainly the spouse through it, and the person who was ill. Martha (Martha Number One) was always around. Then she went into remission for a year and, you know, we all celebrated.

These accounts by Mary, John and Ruth of the group's history highlight how unaware the participants are of the nature of this as a form of learning, i.e. affective learning, but at the same time they display a conscious awareness of the resulting practice in which they engaged. The group continued to meet on a regular basis during the terminal illness of two involved members and one other more peripheral member. In the midst of living their lives, members learnt how to relate to each other and to offer meaningful on-going support. Ruth's recollection that the group continued with their studies whilst offering support to each other through struggles is significant: there is an apparent focus on continuing with a learning programme, but this is not at the expense of supporting those who are struggling. It is during this time that a dominant aspect of the group's identity begins to emerge. The more rational and cognitive dimension of learning begins to be complemented by affective and relational learning as the group members learn how to support each other in times of struggle and, in Rebecca's words, "get very close to people".

Luke Basson and Martha Byrne have since married each other. In reflecting on the marriage between Luke and Martha, Mary recalls,

Mark (Mary's husband) said, long before that happened, 'that is what must happen', it just seemed to be a natural course of things. And we used to pick Martha (Martha Number Two) up; she lived just round the corner here. And one night we were dropping her off and she had made this whole plan, she was going overseas on some sort of boat cruise with friends, and she said 'Luke says he wants to come with us!', and she was quite sort of you know … And we said 'wonderful, great!' And he [Luke] would still have his Christmas parties, he had one at his place, because they had a very good venue at their house, and he had asked Martha 'come and help me with the tables' and all this sort of thing. And we could all see it was going to happen. It is history, and grandchildren have been born and what not.

Rachel (Rebecca's daughter) was not a member of the bible study during this time and says:

What stands out for me in this group is that they are extremely loyal and have been meeting together for years and years. They are kind of loyal and steadfast and mature, compassionate and genuinely deeply concerned about everyone in the bible study, and also people outside the bible study. They have a role in the outside world making a difference, which is quite an amazing thing that you don't find often.

Ruth (the group's leader), reflecting on the phases the group has passed through, says, "So there have been times when the focus has been more on the compassion, fellowship, support side and other times when it has been more on a fairly intellectual, bible study type side." In the next chapter I will return to this comment of Ruth to discuss the dual nature of the group's learning.

In observing the group meetings, the rich sense of history is apparent through the use of key words and references to members of their families and incidents. Lave and Wenger write about the reproductive cycles in communities of practice as leaving "a historical trace of artifacts – physical, linguistic and symbolic – and of social structures, which constitute and reconstitute the practice over time" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 58). Part of the practice of this home group bible study is to begin each session with what I termed 'social interaction' during the observation phase of data collection. It is only apparent to me now that this is a highly significant practice for this group, and that the deep sense of relationship that the members have with each other, is built and

developed during this time. During the period of my observations, the time given to 'social interaction' could take between 20 and 30% of the total time of the session. Feedback and listening to new developments in their lives is conducted in an efficient, friendly and compassionate manner. Members of the group listen in silence to the stories of others and ask questions to clarify their understanding.

Having introduced the members and their relationships I will now present the bible study programme which the group was occupied with during the time of my study.

Bible study programme followed during time of observation

At the time of observation and interviews the group was coming to the end of the *Living the Questions* study, which they had started some months before. This programme has both written documentation and a video component to be studied, and participants were required to prepare for each session. The members of this home group bible study are emphatic about 'not doing homework' but most members, in most instances I observed, did in fact prepare for the sessions.

Briefly, the US-based *Living the Questions* organisation

is a source of curriculum and media for both seekers and "church alumni/ae" convinced that Christianity still has relevance in the 21st Century. Providing a variety of flexible resources, Living the Questions can help people explore the future of Christianity and what a meaningful faith can look like in today's world … [The programme provides] a safe environment where people have permission to ask the questions they've always wanted to ask but have been afraid to voice for fear of being thought a heretic. ("Living the Questions," 2012)

Ruth, the group leader, offered commentary on how the group came to study this particular programme and the group's response to it. In answering my query about how the study programme was selected she said: "Sometimes it is direction from the minister. So *Living the Questions* was that." I also asked her about how the group dealt with dissent, and she said "I think everyone in our group would be completely devastated if we thought that people left a Tuesday evening with anybody hurting or anybody angry" and brought up the *Living the Questions* programme to support her

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argument.

> I mean *Living the Questions* is probably the one that for some of us, or probably for all of us, at some stage during the series, we have disagreed with what is being presented … Richard (the resident minister) had hoped that most, if not all, the groups would take up the *Living the Questions* study, and it caused huge angst in some of the groups and in the end I think we were the only group that did see it through from beginning to end, for whatever reason. But there were some people who felt it was quite heretical – and I can see why that could be. We decided to keep going with it because we thought there were enough things in it that were either really of interest to us, and they kind of connected with some of the issues that Ian (resident minister of another church, and presenter of a course over one Lent period) had raised in the Manna and Mercy course, about ways of moving away from sort of taking the bible too literally but at the same time maintaining a focus on essential truths within the bible.

It may be that this group, with its strong identity of being supportive, being close to people, compassionate and loyal, secure in relationship, was enabled to tackle a programme that had caused anxiety in some other bible study home groups. Certainly this home group bible study saw the programme through, as Ruth says, "from beginning to end, for whatever reason." A deep sense of trust in each other allows the whole person to learn, both cognitively and in a way that is able to deal with fears, doubts and emotions.

Mark, describing the group as more rational, academic and cerebral, says "this is why the group is happy to tackle the *Living the Questions* programme, and to debate. The people in the group have moved away from a literal approach to the bible, to showing more loving and compassion." Here Mark's interpretation points to a more holistic view of learning from the bible. In this community of practice trust has allowed the participants to give voice to wider interpretations of biblical text, and the practice has now become one of showing love and compassion and being more questioning.

John's (Ruth's husband) feedback on the series was: "Then of course you suddenly encounter a bombshell like this particular study we have just been doing, which kind of I suppose pulls the rug out from under your feet." Rachel (Rebecca's daughter) enjoyed the study programme, but speaks of moments of struggle in developing new understanding:

This is probably the best series we have ever done … It has been the most thought-provoking I think of any series; it is completely different to anything we have ever done … It wasn't something that you could do and just forget about; I think it is something that we will all be thinking about for a very long time - and struggling with. I found it thought-provoking and I love the format, the way they have done it all, I think it is excellent.

John and Rachel's narratives reflect what Mezirow refers to as transforming points of view. Mezirow (2000a) defines a frame of reference as a 'meaning perspective', the means by which our assumptions and expectations filter our sense impressions. Frames of reference arise out of the ways in which we interpret experience, and are composed of two dimensions: a habit of mind (a set of assumptions that is used to interpret the meaning of experience) and the resulting point of view (a cluster of meaning schemes). Meaning schemes are "sets of immediate specific expectations, beliefs, feelings, attitudes and judgments that tacitly direct and shape a specific interpretation and determine how we judge, typify objects and attribute causality" (Mezirow, 2000a, p. 18).

Mezirow goes on to say that frames of reference are transformed, both our own and those of others, when we become reflective of assumptions and their context –"the source, nature and consequences of taken-for-granted beliefs" (Mezirow, 2000a, p. 19). Both John and Rachel highlight how this bible study impacted their frames of reference, and thus provide a concrete example of transformative learning.

During the time of my observations the group studied Parts 16 to 19 of the *Living the Questions* programme titled, in order, Social Justice: Realizing God's Vision; Incarnation: Divinely Human; Prayer: Intimacy with God; and Compassion: The Heart of Jesus' Ministry.

Participation and learning

In the next part of this chapter I describe the findings from the data collected during the study that relate to what led to participation in bible study, and how the members of this group view the nature of their learning. This next section focuses on what motivated the participants to become involved in home group bible study.

Motivation to participate in home group bible study

When asked how they became involved in home group bible study most members were not able to specifically recall how they came to participate in the practice, nor their entry into this particular home group. Ruth remembers that the origin of this bible study is that "we have really been in a group uninterruptedly ever since then. And that goes back into the 80s I would say; it is a very long time ago."

Rebecca's reasons for participating in bible study are

I started quite simply because I love God and I wanted to be brought closer. Bible study was where I could sit and be quiet with Christians … being with people who were like minded, being with people who could teach me. … [They teach me through] teaching from the bible and experience, and they were better read than I was … it gives me the extra something ... being able to ask questions, interject whenever something interesting comes up.

Rebecca's reflections point to the social nature of her learning. She acknowledges that learning is facilitated in this forum through drawing on the experience of the people in the group, having access to their wider and deeper knowledge through being better read, being able to ask or interject, and to engage in dialogue: to be in a place where it is possible to ask questions and to debate with others.

Lave and Wenger (1991) define the central defining characteristic of learning as a situated activity as, what they have termed, legitimate peripheral participation. Learning as a situated activity, "the transformative possibilities of being and becoming complex, full cultural-historical participants in the world", is that which happens through various forms of apprenticeship (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 32). Specifically they "draw attention to the point that learners inevitably participate in communities of practitioners and that the mastery of knowledge and skill requires newcomers to move toward full participation in the sociocultural practices of a community" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). Rebecca's reflections that she believed other members of the home group bible study "to be better read than I was" conveys a deep sense of what Lave and Wenger have termed newcomers and oldtimers, or apprentices and masters. Newcomers to a practice, apprentices, adopt tacit knowledge held by masters, or oldtimers.

John (married to Ruth), too, speaks about one of the traditional purposes of home group bible study: that of inducting and growing new members into the body of the church. His words give a definite sense of master and apprentice in a Community of Practice. John recalls joining a home group bible study:

As part of the introduction to the church, some of the members invited us to … a dinner from which there were people from various home fellowship groups. And over dinner the various leaders of the group spoke about what their groups did, and we were particularly taken with one of the groups and we were with that group for probably about 15 years I suppose.

John points out that joining a home group is often a particular and deliberate choice. There is a sense of choosing which people he and Ruth would select as masters in this community of practice. These comments also highlight the voluntary character of communities of practice.

Ruth (the group leader) said it was so long ago she could hardly remember

… but I had always been hesitant about the commitment that would be required on a week by week basis, so my initial introduction to it … was that we committed ourselves to, I think, a six week course, I think it was a short course. And it is interesting how often that has been a way in for people and a way to join groups – including a couple of the other people in our group. … And then after that, some of the people who were involved in that course – and now I really can't remember whether they were already part of an existing group that we were invited to join or whether we set up a group at that time – whichever way it was, obviously at that time it was a case of us joining up other people.

Rachel (Rebecca's daughter) remembers becoming involved in home group bible study as: "I think the first bible study I went to was the people who ran the Alpha group [a programme for new Christians]; I did Alpha, and a Bible study formed out of that. … Ja. So I think that was my first bible study ever and I did quite enjoy it."

Both Ruth and Rachel highlight making an initial small commitment to bible study and then making a more serious and long-term commitment. In Ruth's case the long-term commitment has now spanned 30 years, and she and John have become increasingly involved and responsible for directing this home group bible study. Wenger (1998)

writes of successive forms of participation as trajectories, but furthermore links the on-going work of identity in practice to the formation of these trajectories.

Wenger holds that identity in practice, the constant becoming, is the consequence of interplay between participation and reification. He understands participation to be the process of taking part and those relations with others that reflect this process. "Participation … is both personal and social. It is a complex process that combines doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging. It involves our whole person, including our bodies, minds, emotions, and social relations" (Wenger, 1998, pp. 55-56). Reification means to regard something abstract as a material or concrete thing ("Free Merriam-Webster Dictionary," n.d.). Wenger's use of the term reification is used to convey the subtlety of how we negotiate meaning. "We project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own" (Wenger, 1998, p. 58). In the dynamic tension between participation and reification, our constantly renegotiated identity in practice emerges.

As an outsider making observations of this home group bible study I perceived what I understand as reification on several occasions. I understand Wenger's definition of reification, the projecting of negotiated meaning in all its subtlety, as those moments when members of the group had to explain meanings of phrases to me. The use of "Martha Number One" and "Martha Number Two" is a mechanism by which the group members use shorthand to describe the deaths of Martha Byrne (Martha Number One), Martha (Martha Number Two) Basson's husband and the subsequent marriage of Luke Byrne to Martha Basson. In another example the home group also collects contributions for cards, gifts and charitable purposes in a plastic squirrel money box. Ruth (the leader), during one observed session, says to the group, "Eve has brought this along and I don't know if people have had any thoughts during the week about who you would like us to give the squirrel money to this year?" (Observed session 22 November 2011) and "[i]n relation to donations and so forth; the squirrel will be appearing next week to get started with contributions from us for this year for whatever we might have needs for during the course of the year" (Observed session 24 January 2012). These two comments by Ruth provide examples of an abstract idea, the collection of money for gifts and charity, which is concretised in the form of 'squirrel', the means of setting the money aside for this purpose. The use of the term 'squirrel' only has meaning within the context of this home group bible study.

Wenger sees the formation of a community of practice as equivalent to the negotiation

of identities. When he speaks of identity as learning trajectory, he means how "we define who we are by where we have been and where we are going" (Wenger, 1998, p. 149). Further, Wenger understands the term trajectory to imply a continuous motion, having "a coherence through time that connects the past, the present, and the future" (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). He describes five types of trajectories: peripheral; inbound; insider; boundary and outbound trajectories. These trajectories variously describe the nature of identity formation through participation in the community of practice. With an insider trajectory Wenger holds that the formation of identity does not end with full participation. He maintains that the practice will continue to evolve. New generations, newcomers, new events, new demands create opportunities to renegotiate one's identity. Ruth's identity, as oldtimer and master in this community of practice, could be typical of an insider trajectory.

Rachel's use of the word "they" said earlier in this chapter, "They are extremely loyal and have been meeting together for years and years. They are kind of loyal … They have a role in the outside world" and "as a younger person I do feel a little bit different" could be reflecting identity through either a peripheral or inbound trajectory. In a peripheral trajectory the participant, either from choice or by necessity, does not move towards full participation. Wenger writes "Yet they may well provide a kind of access to a community that becomes significant enough to contribute to one's identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 154). On balance I see Rachel's comment reflecting an inbound trajectory. In this example provided by Rachel newcomers join the community with the prospect of becoming full participants in the practice. Wenger contends that the identities of these participants are invested in their future participation although their present participation may be peripheral.

Wenger posits that some trajectories hold value in spanning boundaries and linking communities of practice. Whilst communities of practice have shared histories of learning over time these histories may create discontinuities depending on who has been participating and who has not. These discontinuities are termed boundaries and are manifest as the learning in moving from one community of practice to another (Wenger, 1998). Wenger uses the term 'brokering' to mean the transmission of some element of one practice by a member of a community of practice into another community of practice. Mary's identity could be understood to be that of a boundary trajectory when she says "I bring a lot from the Bible study, what I have learnt there, into my [Sunday School lesson]." Later in this chapter I will write more about both Mary and Ruth as brokers.

Mark and Mary had moved to many places in South Africa and Mary recollects

> … because we moved quite a bit … to meet friends you joined the church and you
> joined a something. So I don't know if that is the right motivation but that is what we
> have always done. And that I suppose is how we sort of started our social life in a
> new town – was being involved in church and Bible study.

Mark concurs with Mary's reasons for joining a home group bible study: "Mary was always involved, notably in East London, and we were both involved in running the Guild. We came to Johannesburg in 1987, and joined bible study as a means of integrating into the church here." Both Mary and Mark highlight a strong desire to be involved in meaningful relationships with others, particularly in times of stressful circumstances such as moving into a new town and setting up a new home. Further reasons for choosing to join bible study are to meet people and a means of integrating into a particular society. Again, picking up on an earlier observation, both Mary and Mark point to home group bible study being a way of getting into the practices of a larger body, in this case their church.

In summary, the reasons why people in this study start attending bible study is to learn, to be able to ask questions, for fellowship, social interaction and as a way to integrate into the broader church body, and at a personal level as a means of integrating into a faith community. In some instances there is an initial small commitment that grows to something bigger. What keeps people in the group is that they feel they can trust, and can both be supported and offer support. Caring, concern and compassion are trademarks of this particular home group bible study. Members of this home group will often join in celebrations and other social activities with members of the home group bible study beyond only meeting for bible study.

As part of reporting on the findings this next part explores how the participants view the nature and purpose of their learning.

The nature and purpose of learning

The nature of learning as perceived by the participants of this home group bible study points to their being content with doubt and not knowing all the answers. They also report a broadening of their understanding through inviting viewpoints of others and a

consequent personal shift in meaning perspectives, or habits of mind. They acknowledge the social nature of learning, and often cited examples where they act on the purpose or application of the Bible's message rather than focusing on the message itself. The role of emotions, learning in order to teach better, reflection, and fellowship are other focus points of how the participants experience their learning.

In this first section which explores the nature and purpose of learning, I elucidate how the participants demonstrate a holistic view of learning. Dirkx (1997), drawing on the work of Freire, Daloz, Cranton and Mezirow, states that "transformative learning represents a heroic struggle to wrest consciousness and knowledge from the forces of unconsciousness and ignorance" but that this represents only a partial understanding "of the process of change, self-discovery, and social critique." (Dirkx, 1997, p. 79), Dirkx argues that this strongly rational, ego-based view is the way of logos, "the triumph of reason over instinct, ignorance, and irrationality" whereas highly personal and imaginative ways of knowing is the way of mythos, "a dimension of knowing that is manifest in the symbolic, narrative and mythological" (Labouvie-Vief, cited in Dirkx, 1997, p. 80). Dirkx further argues that viewing learning in adulthood in all its messiness and mystery, and its being embedded in the concreteness of everyday life, is to take a more holistic view of the nature of learning.

Holistic view of learning

Participants show a holistic view of how learning in this bible study home group affects their outlook as Christians. Mark says that he is more comfortable with the group's approach to bible study than in the previous "more spiritual" home group. In reflecting on the nature of the current bible study he says, "We have moved away from a literal approach to the bible, towards showing more loving and compassion." For Mark, being able to express love and demonstrate compassion outweighs a more cognitive approach to the study of the bible.

Fellowship and support

John (married to Ruth) succinctly describes the sense of this community of practice

In general I think that there is a huge amount of benefit in being a member of the

group. Sure, one studies the bible and aspects of the bible during those gatherings, but the title of home fellowship group is equally important and I think that as much learning takes place about our Christian lives in the fellowship component as do we learn about Christianity and our faith from the various studies we have done over the years. 50% of our time together [is] getting some insight into the bible and the teachings and so on, and the other 50% of the time [is spent in] learning about how to be compassionate to our friends and support them.

John's insight into the practice of this bible study focuses on how he sees the activities of the members. His highlighting that 50% of the time is about learning the teachings of Christ, and the remaining time is about practicing the teachings of Christ, is reminiscent of praxis in the language of Freire (1972). John is showing how the members of this bible study spend time in reflection and consequent action. Ruth puts it this way: "There have been times when the focus has been more on the compassion, fellowship, support side and other times when it has been more on a fairly intellectual, Bible study type side."

The aspect of being in fellowship with others of the group provides a powerful reason for being part of this community of practice. Mary (married to Mark) supports Ruth and John's views about being supported in the group.

If I had an issue, I would phone somebody in bible study before anybody else. I would phone my sister, because now I have only got my sister, and Mark has also lost his brother. So there was support there. So maybe one could almost say the support system is greater than the bible study! Is that a terrible thing to say? … Okay, the fellowship and the support is huge and bible study is a very high second. Oh! Ruth would probably shoot me!

Interestingly, in parallel to Mary's comments, Ruth says, "fundamentally I suppose I have to say, now that you are getting me to think about it, that it is first and foremost a fellowship and support group and it's secondly, but importantly, a space in which we try to grow, learn more."

Mark (married to Mary) gives some examples of how this support is manifest. He says that the people in the group are interested in each other, and will pray for the group members who are in need. Sometimes they will help with finances where required, and also help each other through their networks. Prayer provides the means to consolidate

support and relationship building as Ruth, the group's leader, explains:

> It is interesting that when we have had a long teaching series that we have decided
> to do instead of having the home group, after a while people really miss the coming
> together in the home group. … [Relationship] seems to be really important, and of
> course part of it is always prayer – well pretty much always, is prayer time for people
> in the group and people they are concerned about and sometimes from the church
> prayer list and other issues sometimes too.

Both Ruth and Mary articulate their thoughts, after some reflection, about the nature of
their learning in this home group bible study as being firstly about fellowship and
support, which is about learning in relationship. Yet a further aspect of the nature of
adult learning in this non-formal context is what I have named discipline and routine,
discussed in the next section.

Discipline and routine

Another dimension of the nature of learning as reported by the participants is clustered
around discipline and regularity of meetings. Several of the participants made
reference to the routine and discipline of attending weekly bible study. Although this
group will take a break over one or several weeks if there are not enough people to
meet, most report an enjoyment of meeting often and regularly. Ruth (bible study
leader) describes it thus:

> But if we find sometimes that we don't have a critical mass, you know, say half a
> dozen people in the middle of winter are sick, or too many are away on holiday, then
> we just don't meet; we just say we don't have a critical mass. And we've sometimes
> when we have really had a situation where a lot of people are going to be away, we
> have just said 'Okay, we are treating this as a break'. And then we all start again.
> But that doesn't happen very often but it certainly has done.

Mary and Mark say of meeting every week:

> It is nice, because Tuesday's you know … We are not big … we like to stay at
> home, we love to stay at home. So it is quite a big sacrifice, even this going to bible
> study! You know, but no matter what, we will go. … It is a routine. … And we would

rather do that than, say, go to movies at Rosebank. And then have the next six days at home!

Rebecca (Rachel's mother), in reflecting on the practice of attending bible study regularly, makes the following comment, "Well, I wouldn't be as disciplined. The discipline of having one evening a week, time set aside regularly, where I would otherwise be reading a book or just doing nothing very much. That helps a great deal." Here Rebecca links learning with discipline, routine and focus. She, Mary and Mark, being retired and with grown-up families, also highlight the importance of allocating time for study and fellowship in lives otherwise unstructured by work and family commitments.

Tolerance of ambiguity

A frequently occurring response to what participants' understanding of how their faith was developing was the acceptance of the views of others, and how this might well change their meaning perspectives. Earlier in this chapter I discussed what Mezirow (2000b) refers to as meaning perspective. Cranton (2006), citing Mezirow, says that transformative learning is all about "learning that transforms problematic frames of reference … (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets) … in order to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Cranton, 2006, p. 23). Several times the participants told me they felt comfortable about not knowing answers, and their acceptance of this state as a way of being.

When asked how he dealt with dilemmas that may arise from a bible study session Mark says, "I would not rush off into a private study, and I have never gone to the minister for counselling. Where doubt remains, it is a way of being. There are many complex issues, and I'm comfortable with not knowing all the answers."

Mackeracher (2004) in her examination of the term 'soul work' begins with the recognition that the Self comprises several different identities. These identities emerge as inconsistent behaviours that depend on the various roles, cultural contexts and responsibilities of the individual. She defines soul work, or soulful learning, as "an exploration of these various identities with a view to knowing them better, bringing their essence to consciousness, contemplating their ambiguity and mystery, and accepting them for what they are" (Mackeracher, 2004, p. 174). Here Mark's last sentence powerfully demonstrates his willingness to engage in soul work. In summarising the work of writers in the field of soul work, Mackeracher highlights that soul work cannot be accomplished as a rational, linear problem solving, intellectual exercise that seeks the right answer, but rather as that which relies on holistic contemplation searching for a healthy answer. Moore's observation "that when we try to live 'in an intellectually predictable world protected from all mysteries and comfortable with conformity, we lose our everyday opportunities for a soulful life'" (cited in Mackeracher, 2004, p. 174) can be seen in Mark's, and others', attitude to dealing with mystery and ambiguity.

Rebecca (Rachel's mother) too is content dealing with ambiguity, and the lack of absolute truths. She says:

> We are all very different and we all come with different things, different frames of reference; so what is meaningful to me might not be meaningful to you, and life experiences would be such that you aren't always on the same page. … It is people looking at things in a different way. It doesn't really matter actually; it is just a difference of opinion. … Slowly, I think, over the years; my idea of God has changed since I started. I was quite fundamentalist in the beginning. I would quote the Bible [left, right and centre]. Alright, I would have very few questions, but by reading the Bible … My faith in God was very simple in the beginning: he was my prophet and my priest and my daily companion. I could just ask him any simple thing and I expected to get an answer in a very simple way. I am not explaining it very well. Basically my faith was very simple but the more I know God, the less I know him! But it is okay to know Him less [based on] trust and experience.

It is of interest to note that Rebecca makes use of a concept from Mezirow's transformative learning theory when she uses the term 'frames of reference'. While she uses 'frames of reference' in lay terms, she is in fact referring to what Mezirow describes as the function of meaning perspectives.

Langer, cited by Mezirow (2000b), defines mindful learning as characterised by being open to new information, the continuous creation of new categories, and being aware that more than one perspective is possible. He goes on to make the point that there are different degrees of comprehension and mindfulness in becoming aware of one's thoughts. "In adulthood, informed decisions require not only awareness of the source and context of our knowledge, values and feelings but also critical reflection on the validity of their assumptions or premises" (Mezirow, 2000b, p. 7). Rebecca's explanation of how her idea of God has changed over time shows that she has experienced a fundamental shift in her knowledge, and how comfortable she is as she questions the premises of her faith and relationships. Bruner, cited in Mezirow, (2000b, p. 13), "defines open-mindedness as a 'willingness to construe knowledge and values from multiple perspectives without a loss of commitment to one's own values'". Rebecca's comment that "it is okay to know him less" bears out her open-mindedness. Rachel echoes the viewpoint that it is not troublesome for her to have an incomplete understanding. She says "it [the Bible] is still a book I love and enjoy, and the problematic parts are fine; I don't mind leaving those and not understanding them."

Likewise, John's (married to Ruth) pragmatic approach to developing his understanding of parts of the Bible is explained thus:

> But I suppose then you also start challenging yourself with saying 'Does it really matter whether there was a virgin birth?' Does it really matter if Jesus lay in the ground in the tomb for three days and then only the grave cloths were left there and not anything else? Does it really affect what his (Jesus') basic teaching was? So my answer to much of that has had to be 'No, it doesn't really matter that much' … It doesn't really matter that much.

During one of the observed bible study sessions Mary, in confronting a particularly difficult new idea, remarked "I am about to resign because of this [*Living the Questions*] bible study!" Despite the fact that some of the participants of this home group bible study often expressed their difficulty with confronting revised meaning perspectives, this seems to be insufficient reason for them to leave this community of practice. This is noteworthy for me because of my personal experience in a home group bible study I once attended. My less literal view of the bible led to repeated incidents of dispute and consequent disquiet for me when the members of this group viewed my arguments as heretical. I eventually withdrew from this community of practice, what I now understand to be an outbound trajectory (Wenger, 1998, p. 155). Some trajectories lead out of a community of practice where the outbound journey involves developing new relationships, finding a different position with respect to a community, and seeing the world and oneself in a different way.

In this section called "Tolerance of ambiguity" the spoken words show how the meaning perspectives of the participants have shifted. They have come to see knowledge as more provisional and less definite, grown more comfortable with being unsure, and open to the possibility of there being more than one answer. This may be a function of late adulthood, or of this bible study home group's leadership, which is perceived as academic and intellectual.

During the course of this research I came to be aware of Fowler's Faith Development Theory. Whilst I do not wish to bring another theoretical lens into this study, I think it useful to use Krau's (2008) succinct summary of the work of Fowler as a possible further explanation of this group's tolerance for ambiguity. Fowler has based his developmental theory on the works of Piaget, Kohlberg and Erikson, and has defined

seven stages of faith development. These stages are sequential but not inevitable, and are linked to age. The stages are primal faith (infants and toddlers); intuitive-projective faith (pre-school to early elementary); mythic-literal faith (elementary school); synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence); individuative-reflective faith (early adulthood); conjunctive faith (mid-life and beyond) and finally universalizing faith (rare, older adulthood). It is the last three of these stages that are of interest here in providing a way of viewing how the participants of the home group bible study learn. Fowler's Faith Development Theory could also provide new openings for future research arising from this study.

Stage 5 is defined as the individuative-reflective faith stage, and is linked to the young adulthood age range. It is characterised by making a belief system explicit, and the ability to engage in critical self-reflection. Disillusionment with "absolutes" serves as the prompt to the next stage. Rebecca could be in this faith stage based on the following comments.

> For me [prayer] is how I have a close relationship with God, because I bring everything to him. So if I suddenly can't do that I don't really know anymore, who is this God, when I don't know how to pray anymore. … Sometimes you might pray for protection and something bad happens. I understand all that, that bad things happen to good people and it is not that we are going to be completely protected because God is on our side, or that life is going to be smooth and easy or that things are always fair. … I just can't believe in the kind of God they are talking about. But it is something I will keep wrestling with. … It is humbling to be confronted with something and think 'well perhaps I have been thinking on it wrong', and it does make you become more like the authors of this series: you become more compassionate, more willing to listen to other people, less dogmatic.

The penultimate stage, Stage 6 is called the conjunctive faith stage, typical of mid-life and beyond. People in this stage recognise the subjectivity of experience and the possibility of the existence of multiple perspectives. It is in coming to terms with paradox and ambiguity that serves as the catalyst for transitioning to the last stage, that of universalizing faith. Whilst Fowler states that people rarely attain this stage, it is typical of older adulthood. This stage is characterised by an enlarged vision of universal community and the seeking of ultimate meaning (Krau, 2008). On balance I view the participants in this case study as in the transition from Stage 6 to Stage 7. While it was inappropriate to employ an additional framework discovered in the midst of

this study, future research could explore adult learning in faith environments using Fowler's Faith Development Theory.

Another characteristic of the nature of learning in this community of practice is what I call "learning in order to teach".

Learning in order to teach

Mary (Mark's wife) and Ruth (the group's leader) both spoke about learning in terms of being better equipped to teach or lead others in their learning. Mary uses material from certain bible study sessions to teach young children in Sunday School, but also points to how she reflects on this material during the week:

> And certainly I have found in as far as teaching Sunday School, I bring a lot from the bible study, what I have learnt there, into my [lesson] … often on a Saturday night, in my mind, I change my whole bible study lesson! Maybe it is God's divine interference (sic) and He thinks 'really, what you did [during] last Tuesday [bible study] is really not the right thing'!

Ruth's reflections about how she leads the group speaks to how she is herself learning:

> One of the things about being the so-called leader is that at the very least, I will prepare. So when we did the *Living Questions* (sic) I would have read through the whole booklet for that section and sorted out what was there and thought to at least some extent how it might be led. Quite often I'll just, as a teacher, … I will make some judgments about how we work with the material. But one of the good things for me is that, whereas if I were busy and I was just a member of the group I might decide 'oh well, I will just give it a quick skim', I will at least now read and think fairly carefully beforehand, and that is really good for me. And sometimes I will find that I need, or I don't know enough about something then I will consult Richard (the resident minister), Margaret (leader of Spiritual Formation group) – they would be two of my likely sources – or ask Luke to look up something, he has a really good commentary to look up something. Or go on the internet, but I don't do that often, I don't really have the time. … So there are always opportunities for me to learn.

Both Ruth and Mary display ways of being brokers. Wenger (1998) describes brokering as those connections provided by people who introduce elements of one practice to another. Ruth as academic and researcher will plan a bible study session and, "as a teacher … will make some judgments about how we work with the material". Here we can clearly see elements from her teaching practice being used in the home group bible study community of practice. What is interesting to note, though, is Wenger's contention that brokers often position themselves at the boundaries of their many practices. He says that "brokering often entails ambivalent relations of multimembership" and that brokers "would rather stay at the boundaries … than move to the core of any one practice" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109). This is not the case with Ruth, as she is situated at the centre of this practice.

Mary shows why the task of brokering can be complex. In her reflections about taking what she has learnt in the home group bible study as preparation for her teaching in Sunday school, she demonstrates how brokering "involves processes of translation, coordination and alignment between perspectives. … It also requires the ability to link practices by facilitating transactions between them, and to cause learning by introducing into a practice elements of another" (Wenger, 1998, p. 109).

In these extracts of interviews with Ruth and Mary the practice of reflection is also paramount to how they learn and make meaning. In this next section I look at reflection and revised meaning perspectives as I analyse the nature of learning.

Reflection and revised meaning perspectives

Earlier in the chapter I discussed Mezirow's revision of meaning perspective. This emerged as a key factor in how the participants learned whilst in the home group bible study. As part of the data collection process I asked the members of the bible study group to write journals reflecting on their learning during the time of my observations of their bible study. The group was emphatic that they did not do homework but, in the end, five of the group did keep a journal. For some of those who kept a journal it was a surprise at how enjoyable they found the exercise. Mary said of the experience, "And I found the whole week I would sort of be thinking of it and it was better in fact for me, to do it on the following week because I had thought through a lot of stuff; whereas if I had done it the very next morning I think I would have maybe…anyway. [Keeping a] journal

was good!" Mary highlights the process of critically reflecting on what she had heard, watched and read from the last week's bible study, and how she needed the time for this exercise. Mary makes a further point that there is a fundamental shift in the way she looks at the bible now. She says "And I think it is going to be quite interesting when we study [the book of] Mark; I think we are going to look at [the book of] Mark in a different way. … I think we will definitely not look at it as 'this is black and this is white'."

Rachel (Rebecca's daughter), too, found the journal-writing useful in developing her understanding and sense-making in this programme. She says, "This is probably the best series we have ever done. I don't know if writing it down has made a difference but it has been the most thought-provoking I think of any series; it is completely different to anything we have ever done."   However a single episode did cause her deep moments of disquiet, and prompted her to doubt the veracity of the programme: "And I was happy to go along with almost every single thing they said until the very last one we did before we broke up for the holidays, which was the one on prayer, and that was so jarring that in the end I couldn't accept it, and that has made me question the entire series now." Rachel has reconciled her inner conflict by reasoning that what was agreed in the bible study session "was not my experience, it is not the way I was brought up and it is not how I have experienced God my entire life, so I can't reconcile that with what I have seen happening in my life. And I think actually that what they are saying is partly true, but partly I think they don't really know."

Mezirow writes that "our values and sense of self are anchored in our frames of reference. They provide us with a sense of stability, coherence, community, and identity. … Viewpoints that call our frames of reference into question may be dismissed as distorting, deceptive, ill intentioned or crazy" (Mezirow, 2000b, p. 18). Mezirow also holds that, through the process of transformative learning, we are capable of building more dependable frames of reference: ones that are more inclusive; permeable; differentiating; critically reflective of assumptions; integrative of experience and emotionally capable of change. What Rachel's reflections show is the move towards building more dependable frames of reference: she is able to accept partial truth of others, an indication of what Mezirow (2000) called permeability.

Social nature of learning

Learning as a group and in a group has been described by the participants as a particularly powerful means of learning about the content and purpose of the bible. Both transformative learning and community of practice are about learning as a social activity.

John (Ruth's husband) holds the view that:

> I suppose it has been a significant learning experience in as much as you come into a group thinking that you are pretty well versed in your faith, in your understanding of the do's and don'ts versed in the practical applications of things biblical and so on, but it is really once you start discussing things with the others in the group that the important points come up. … I suppose the first thing to do is to raise them [questions] in the group and see what other people think about them. Sometimes even if you think to yourself, 'I personally can't accept this but what does the group think about this?' and you raise it with the group and sometimes you find that it is split 50/50 – some can accept and others say 'Uh-uh, it is not very likely'. But how does one come to terms with it? I think it is only over time really that I think it is going to sort itself out.

Ruth puts it this way:

> Perspectives from the group, fantastic, ja, because people bring different experiences you know? Rebecca often has very wise and interesting things to say and Rachel often asks quite challenging questions and particularly ones that relate to her as a parent of young children and so on. And Luke (married to Martha) can sometimes bring things from his … business experience as well as from life experience and feed those into the group. And Mark (married to Mary) also – Mark is close to my heart in terms of the whole sort of social justice passion that he has and the way he really works that out.

Mark encapsulates the social nature of learning. He says, "I enjoy the benefits of the debate in the group. We get different views, get some context, and this allows me to adapt my belief system … I enjoy the questioning views and attitudes held by the group."

These comments highlight the importance of dialogue in constructing new meanings, in revising Mark's meaning perspectives. The participants in the home group bible study point to how questioning, debate and being exposed to different views allows them to reconstruct their understanding, and to change their belief systems. In Mark's comment made in the prior paragraph he uses the word 'enjoy', giving prominence to the role of emotion, discussed next, in his learning experience.

Role of emotions

In the interviews and journals there are several references made to how emotion plays a significant role in learning. Rachel's observation that "the first time you find out the bible is not completely accurate is a bit of a shock" and "I was happy to go along"; John's reflection that "it has always fascinated me and worried me that so much of the bible are direct quotes" and "it was a huge relief"; Mark's journal entry that "I was moved to confront my own prejudices"; Mary's writing that "I didn't feel I got anything out of this other than guilt and feeling inadequate"; Ruth talking of "people don't always show their hurt or their anger or their whatever negative emotion"; and Rebecca's writing in her journal that she "felt at ease sharing, was 'challenged' and stretched" all underline the importance of emotion in learning. That the participants were comfortable in naming emotions in their reflections about how they learn, points to the deeply embedded dimension of learning holistically. I base the level of comfort experienced on the fact that no-one apologised for, or noticed, using emotions to describe their learning.

Dirkx writes that while learning is "experienced in particular ways within particular contexts, these experiences all share powerful emotional dimensions that help shape and influence the meaning of these experiences" (Clark & Dirkx, 2008, p. 89). Dirkx is careful to caution that emotion is not something that invades the experience of learning. Rather it is a case of using affect and emotion to express learning in a different way: "We are offered a kind of language for reinterpreting ourselves and the possibility to experience and recreate our sense of selves, our subjectivities, our being in-the-world" (Clark & Dirkx, 2008, p. 90).

Dirkx also highlights that emotions in learning are intimately bound up with the experience of difference. Here Rachel's reflections give support to the power of emotion in learning. She says:

I think I am surprised that the whole bible study feels differently, and shocked. …
When I was asking Richard about it, it was very important, and actually deeply
upsetting for me, this whole issue; it was quite hard to bring up, and even when I
spoke to my mom about it the next day I was trying not to cry. In the bible study
and talking to Richard I was battling to keep my emotions in check. … But I feel
like I put myself out there a bit and I don't know, it made me feel a bit silly you
know.

Dirkx believes that emotions provide a means to more fully grasp the wholeness of
one's experiences. He writes, "Allowing students to give voice to powerful affect is not
getting it off their chests and getting it out of the way, but encouraging them to own and
integrate these feelings and emotions within their sense of being" (Clark & Dirkx, 2008,
p. 92). Rachel demonstrates how she owns and has integrated her feelings and
emotions into her sense of being when she follows with "I have never had a jolt like
this. And I would still prefer to have done it [*Living the Questions* study] than not to do
it. Because it has revealed to me what my view of God is. If God is not for me then …
so that is very kind of childish and selfish."

Dirkx holds that embracing the "constructive role of emotions in adult learning is to
recognize the powerful role that emotions play in both the meaning we make of our
lives and the ways in which we construct that meaning" (Clark & Dirkx, 2008, p. 93).

In this final section I look at my findings in the context of the Word-World relationship,
how learning in this home group bible study impacts the manner in which the
participants live their lives.

The Word-World Relationship

By 'Word' in this heading I take it to mean the teachings contained in the bible, the
word of God. There is another deeper meaning of 'Word' as explained in John 1:1-
2,14: "[1]Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and
he was the same as God. [2] From the very beginning the Word was with God. [14] The
Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us" (Good News
Bible). So 'word' is also understood to mean God and, in human form, Jesus. In John
1:1 we see reference made to the 'world'. Here I take the meaning of the word 'world'
to mean, as described in the First Letter of John 1:16, "Everything that belongs to the

world – what the sinful self desires, what people see and want, and everything in this world that people are so proud of – none of this comes from the Father; it all comes from the world" (Good News Bible).

Thus this section's heading refers to how the teachings of the bible are translated into action in the world. Word-World relationships are about lifelong learning in developing faith, and the consequent actions taken (or praxis) as a result of this learning. During the interviews, and in journal-writing, some people spoke about reviewing their prayer life, their responses to being loving, supportive and compassionate, and about assimilating their learning into their living.

Mark (Mary's husband) says that for him "prayer was once seen as answer to things such as finding parking spaces and healing" but now he understands it as "a move away from 'God answers my prayers, and grants miraculous cures' to a more practical approach to living."

John (Ruth's husband) talks about a learning experience over a long time, and reflection sparked by a comment made in the DVD:

I suppose in a couple of situations I have got myself so involved in helping out in protecting, in being there for one or two people, it was really taking a huge toll on my life, my work, my social life, to an extent my sanity as well, but once I realised that … It was a huge relief previously when I was told that you can do all these things without it actually screwing up your own life: you can be totally supportive, you can be loving, caring, etc, without it actually being to huge detriment to yourself. And so that was really what I was referring to when I used the comment of the person on the television piece, where he said it is not necessary to knock Christ off the cross, but to just serve him in the ways in which he has taught one to serve. And in some respects you would be getting the same results anyway but you didn't have to kill yourself to do what He was asking.

Rachel (Rebecca's daughter) sees bible study as:

a necessary part of learning, reminding yourself how the bible expects you to be. And somehow collectively all the lessons sink in. I sometimes look back on my notes and I can't remember all of these detailed notes I have taken! But somewhere, it

sinks in collectively over time ... For me I find when I go to church and bible study it is a shift in my perspective, and then you behave a bit better. ... the difference between church and bible study is that bible study is more learning and growing and deeper fellowship. I think each bible study usually has a different focus; so it might be about one aspect and you will put that into practice, and then the next week might be about something different, and then over the years you do assimilate more and more. In most other group situations they all put on a bit of a front, and then in bible study the masks are off. And there is deep caring, you really can rely on people.

In this personal reflection of how and what she has learnt from participating in home group bible study Rachel's learning could be said to be incremental rather than epochal.   According to Mezirow, epochal learning is the result of a "sudden, dramatic, reorienting insight" whereas incremental learning involves "a progressive series of transformations in related points of view that culminate in a transformation of a habit of mind" (Mezirow, 2000a, p. 21). Cranton puts it this way: "Incremental transformation creeps up on a person over months or even years, perhaps partly or mostly an unconscious process, until the day when he or she looks back and says, 'I was a different person then.'" (Cranton, 2006, p. 71). Rachel's words "somehow collectively all the lessons sink in" and Mary's reflection "I think maybe one absorbs things and you are not conscious of it; when you react to situations you are not consciously saying 'ah, I am going to react like this because of the bible study that has happened'" strongly echo Cranton's views on the incremental nature of transformative learning for some participants.

Mary (Mark's wife), in comparing what she learns through church and through home group bible study, says:

It is the filling up slowly of good stuff, or maybe it is filling up the space for good stuff, and getting rid of some of the space where the bad stuff is. I think church is fine, and great. … If one remembers to bring what you have heard in the sermon during the week; whereas bible study, because it is more intense, and there is a discussion, one tends to remember more.

Following on in the same conversation Mark says

> … so that is what, 25 years, almost right from the very beginning we have been part of a group. So it is hard to say, it is such a chunk, about 40% of our lives we have been part of a bible study group! Church, other than the singing and sometimes prayer, is more a one way, whereas bible study is an interactive and is the better mode of memory, of memorising, of learning. You are able to debate; you can't really debate with the minister!

Both Mary and Mark make powerful comments on the nature of learning in the home group bible study through the active construction of knowledge. They highlight the power of dialogue in meaning-making and Mark's acute insight into the 'one-way' passive nature of knowledge construction during a church service stands in sharp contrast with what happens with their learning in bible study. The 'one-way' approach is directly opposite to what happens during dialogue. Mary's comment that through dialogue she tends to remember more is interesting in that it shows conscious and active learning.

Rebecca's learning through home group bible study as it impacts on daily living is:

> It just gives you strength to do the right thing; it is a reminder to be more loving and be more kind and understanding, and to accept who they are, and to be accepting of other people and where they are coming from. Bible study just keeps you walking closely with God. You become more sensitive to other people. You learn how to listen.

Ruth, the group's leader, gives practical examples of how bible study has impacted on how members of the group respond to some of their learning. She says, "… other studies have focused on things like more the social justice, … what, if anything, are you doing individually, as a home group, as a church, to alleviate the plight of people who are less advantaged. And it can be done in various ways." Further elucidating how the bible study home group interprets the social motive, Ruth goes on to say:

> So we have quite often talked about things like that and there have been occasions where from our home group we have made a suggestion or two to the church leadership about doing something or other. But more than that I suppose there is just a very strong social justice sort of agenda really, within our group.

So, for example, the work that Matthew does with people at Ivory Park – the very first discussions around that were Matthew bringing that to our home group and then deciding to go as a home group and invite some other people to go and visit Ivory Park, so we arranged kombis to go and do that. So we had some sense of the people, where they were. So there has been within our home group, a support for Matthew and the Ivory Park outreach. And then Mark has just got so many wonderful outreach projects that he has led and got other people involved in, and there he will sometimes ask us to pray about something or other or he will discuss a particular issue with us and we will discuss what might be a good thing to do in relation to it; and then John and I because we are the church's reps on the Jan Smuts Axis and the link with Pretty and her work for Riverside Child Care, we will sometimes bring issues from that to the group and get advice and guidance and so on. And then as a group we do a Harvest Aid bucket, some people also do their own, but there is this ongoing support for Harvest Aid.

I think it has been a good place for exploring ideas and sometimes for deciding that we want to say something from our group, back to the church, and sometimes it has come the other way – sometimes, well, a couple of times I can think of, Richard has asked for the home groups to comment on something that he needs to feed back to the church hierarchy and so on. And then there is another aspect that I think is common across home groups, and that is for the home groups to be called on by the minister and the church leadership, to play particular roles. And sometimes they don't have to be asked, sometimes they will even volunteer.

Conclusion

In this chapter thick and rich descriptions of the context of this non-formal adult education enterprise have been provided. The participants and the bible study programme followed have also been richly described. I then reported on the findings from the data in three sections: the motivation to participate in a home group bible study, the nature of learning as reported by the participants in the case study, and lastly how this learning affected the praxis of their daily living.

In the next chapter I discuss in more detail the holistic nature of learning reported by the participants but unrecognised by them as a dimension of learning. I also discuss the key roles and characteristics of this community of practice viewed through the lens

of transformative learning theory. I discuss the implications of this study for adult education, and the strengths and limitations of this research study. Recommendations for further research are then suggested.

Chapter 5   Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

The intention of this study is, by means of a case study of a home group bible study, to explore how the members of this fellowship group experience and report on their learning as a result of participating in a bible study. This qualitative research is designed to provide a thick and rich description of the context and case: an ideographic interpretation of a non-formal adult learning situation. Inherent in this research design is examining "situations through the eyes of the participants", and, citing Malinowski, grasping "the point of view of the native, his view of the world and in relation to his life" (Cohen, et al., 2007, p. 168).

The purpose of this study is to generate knowledge about adult learning in the non-formal context of home group bible study and thus to address a gap in the literature, both in South Africa and internationally. It is an exploration of how participants actively construct their own meaning within a particular social setting.

Prior to starting collection of data, literature relating to adult learning was reviewed. The following perspectives inform this study: within the paradigm of social constructivism, theories of communities of practice and transformative learning provide lenses to examine adult learning in the context of a home group bible study. In acknowledging the critique that transformative learning theory does not take the role of emotion into account when theorising about how adults learn, a variant form of transformative learning, holistic learning theory, was also reviewed. This study foregrounds the social nature of learning, especially focusing on the affective domain with regard to the role of emotion and relationships within a community of practice.

In Chapter 4 I discussed the findings in the context of the theoretical and conceptual framework. Major findings presented in Chapter 4 were uncovered through analyses of data generated during the study whilst investigating the research questions. Chapter 4 presented the findings in two main sections: firstly the context of the home group bible study and a description of the members of the case study; and secondly participation and learning in the bible study.

In this chapter I examine how the participants in the case study report on their own meaning- making and learning. I then discuss the implications of these findings for the field of adult learning. Following this I look at the strengths and limitations of this study, and finally I make recommendations for further research.

Research questions and discussion of common themes

This community of practice is about connecting with others; supporting those in need within and outside the home group bible study; worship; and bible study. The group, a community of practice, has formed a very strong identity. This identity may be as a consequence of some traumatic events experienced by the group, and it is through responding at an emotional level to these events, that learning in a dual form is manifest. By 'dual form' I mean that learning happens both cognitively and affectively. There is a heightened awareness of empathy and what it means to offer meaningful support in a practical and tangible way.   This support is manifest both within the group, and also with a larger community outside of the home group.

The practice of this community is both worship and relationship-building, and relationship- building is a function of the holistic learning that they experience, but do not necessarily recognise as learning per se. The participants in this study see learning in strongly rational, cognitive terms and having a particular format and time when they meet. They tend to not see other activities as "learning" even though very important learning about being a Christian and living a Christian faith, the fundamental objectives of a fellowship or bible study home group, takes place in these other activities.

Several of the participants in the case study reflected on how they both offered, and were offered, support during times of difficulty. The expression of care for others, the building of relationships, is now accepted as second nature within the group. Davis-Manigaulte, Yorks and Kasl (2006), in their article on expressive ways of knowing, hold that "expressive practices that elicit imaginal and intuitive ways of knowing can be divided into two categories: (1) creating a learning environment conducive to whole person learning and (2) working with learners within that environment" (Davis-Manigaulte, et al., 2006, p. 31). In fashioning an environment that leads to whole person learning they say that it is through creating an empathic field, as demonstrated within this bible study group, that allows for learning-within-relationship: "being able to know others by identifying with their experiential knowing, especially when that knowing

is deeply emotional or closely tied to personal identity and values, becomes the basis for learning-within-relationship" (Davis-Manigaulte, et al., 2006, p. 31). As they turn their focus onto the learners within the whole-person learning environment, Davis-Manigaulte et al. state that "while many of us silo our experiences into separate categories, affectively they are part of the holistic reservoir of lived experience from which we draw in resolving new challenges" (Davis-Manigaulte, et al., 2006, p. 32). In my interview with Ruth she talks of how people bring their separately categorised experiences into the bible study. Reflecting on her role as leader she says:

> Well one of the things about being the so-called leader is that at the very least, I will prepare. So when we did the *Living the Questions* [programme] I would have read through the whole booklet for that section and sorted out what was there and thought to at least some extent how it might be led. Quite often I'll just as a teacher make a judgment call about some of the ways in which questions get asked, if they are going to irritate our group rather than be productive and so on, or they are too repetitive.

Ruth uses her lived experience as a teacher to help her discern how best to present the material. She continues

> Perspectives from the group, fantastic, ja, because people bring different experiences you know? Rebecca often has very wise and interesting things to say and Rachel often asks quite challenging questions and particularly ones that relate to her as a parent of young children and so on. And Luke can sometimes bring things from his … really I think from his business experience as well as from life experience and feed those into the group. And Mark also – Mark is close to my heart in terms of the whole sort of social justice passion that he has and the way he really works that out.

During the time of my observations of the home group bible study I did not understand the extent of their affective learning, focusing as I did on the more cognitive manifestation of learning. It was only as I conducted the semi-structured interviews and read through the journals that I was struck by how close-knit the group was, and about how the participants in the case study repeatedly reported on the fellowship aspect of this community of practice. There is a deep sense of each of the members being there for each other or, in Rachel's words, "genuinely deeply concerned about everyone in the bible study". As Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006) point out, the members of this home

group bible study are able to draw on the holistic reservoir of lived experience to resolve new challenges and I surmise were thus equipped to deal with difficult issues raised during the *Living the Questions* programme.

Mezirow's (2000b) strongly rational and cognitive approach in transformative learning theory does not take into account the "holistic change in how a person affectively relates to and conceptually frames his or her experience; … a healthy interdependence between affective and rational ways of knowing" (Davis-Manigaulte, et al., 2006, p. 27). A recurring theme amongst the participants was the recognition given to rational ways of knowing, and a downplaying of affective knowing. The following comments made by different participants highlight how they foreground intellectual, academic, and rational learning, whilst simultaneously understating deeply emotional and affective learning.

Ruth contrasts the two dimensions of learning when she says

> ... the focus has been more on the compassion, fellowship, support side, and other times when it has been more on a fairly intellectual, Bible study type side. … I have to say, now that you're getting me to think about it, that it first and foremost a fellowship and support group and it's secondly, but importantly, a space in which we try to grow, learn more.

Mary was embarrassed to acknowledge that her rational learning in the bible study is second to her affective learning: "The support system is greater than the bible study! Is that a terrible thing to say? … Okay, the fellowship and the support is huge and bible study is a very high second. Oh! Ruth would probably shoot me!" Further comment by Mary around their earlier itinerant lifestyle also shows how the affective dimension of learning goes unacknowledged. She says, "Because we moved quite a bit … to meet friends we joined a church. … So I don't know if that is the right motivation." John's words also indicate the dual nature of his learning experience when he says "50% of the time together [is] getting some insight into the bible and the teachings and so on, and the other 50% of the time [is spent in] learning about how to be compassionate to our friends and support them."

Dirkx writes powerfully on what the participants report about their understanding of learning. He argues that

> ... personally significant and meaningful learning is fundamentally grounded in and is derived from the adult's emotional, imaginative connection with the self and with the broader social world. The meanings we attribute to emotions reflect the particular socio-cultural and psychic contexts in which they arise. This process of meaning-making, however, is essentially imaginative and extrarational, rather than merely reflective and rational. Emotionally charged images, evoked through the contexts of adult learning, provide the opportunity for a more profound access to the world by inviting a deeper understanding of ourselves in relationship with it. (Dirkx, 2001, p. 64)

Heron, as cited in Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006), uses the term presentational knowing to describe what "happens when conceptual processes interact with imagination and intuition so as to enable learners to perceive patterns. … it includes engagement with [inter alia] … all forms of myth, fable, allegory, story and drama" (Davis-Manigaulte, et al., 2006, p. 27). In my research a concrete example of how the participants engage in imaginal ways of knowing is provided when the home group bible study requested the resident minister, Richard, to help them understand some of the questions raised in the *Living the Questions* programme. In this excerpt from the recorded session of 14 February 2012 Richard deals with the interpretation of stories from the bible:

> The issue is not the story, whether it is historically correct or whether it is an interpretation. The issue is 'what is the message?' So therefore the Christmas narrative: who cares and who knows when and how and if. The important thing is that God breaks into humanity, not as a mighty triumphant God, but as the God in the Garden of Eden – very humbly, very quiet. … So when it comes to teaching, I think the scriptures, stories, and the scriptural accounts are packages that absolutely reveal God's breaking into the world and what God desires. And in the same way that we tell fairy tale stories - why? The message. … Now after a bible story what is the message really? God cares about you, God is concerned about you, God wants you to be in a good relationship with somebody else, God wants you to live as a good citizen of God's kingdom, God wants humility, God wants… I don't know, but what I am saying is at the end of the Bible story you need to have that 'and they all lived happily ever after'. And I really don't have problems with the biblical stories and I think the important thing is, … what that passage is

saying is that God breaks into our existence.

This example shows how learning in imaginative and intuitive ways is surfaced through the medium of story-telling, and that this learning is not of the rational and intellectual domain: "This process of meaning-making … is essentially imaginative and extrarational" (Dirkx, 2001, p. 64).

In connecting emotion and learning in adulthood, Dirkx (2001) writes that much of the theory and practice in adult education marginalises emotion whilst elevating the role of rationality to prime position. Teaching and learning are understood to be largely rational cognitive processes, with emotions perceived as acting either as motivators or impediments to learning. However, Dirkx points out that a strong positive, emotional and affective dimension often contributes to a positive learning experience. This strong affective dimension is characterised by a supportive climate marked by caring and recognition of the individual. Each person feels affirmed. In this climate teachers (or leaders) respect each person, and involve the whole person in the learning experience. Dirkx concludes that the affective and imaginative ways of knowing are modes of knowing in their own right. Certainly the participants in this case study research repeatedly demonstrate affective ways of knowing as a consequence of their engagement in this community of practice.

As I reflect on a primary reason for participating in a home group bible study, that of developing spirituality, I am left wondering if fostering spirituality depends more on affective and intuitive ways of knowing rather than on a rational and cognitive response. In this next section I consider some further implications of this study for adult education.

Implications of study for adult education

I have written much on the role of emotions and affective dimensions as a way of knowing, and as also resulting in a shift in meaning perspectives. This contrasts strongly with Mezirow's (2000b) focus in transformative learning theory on the cognitive and rational ways of knowing. Mezirow couches learning as a function of the mind and gives scant recognition to how the heart, or soul, can impact learning. My research has revealed how adults learn in intuitive and imaginal ways too, whilst they themselves appear only to honour and recognise their rational learning. Indeed, when I approached the group to request permission to conduct my research one participant

said as much. She told me that I was welcome to research the group but that I would find nothing of interest as they were a dull group and not very clever. Over time as I collected the data, and then analysed my findings, I was struck by just how close-knit the group was, and of the deep respect each member had for the others. The whole-person learning described by Davis-Manigaulte et al. (2006) had taken place so naturally that the participants were not able themselves to name the phenomenon and to fully apprehend the multi-dimensionality, depth and complexity of their learning.

What does this mean for adult educators? My study has shown how powerfully adults can learn through the affective dimension. Dirkx is careful to say that the role of emotions should not be seen as motivators or impediments to rational learning, but should be acknowledged as a means of learning in its own right. Given the current dominance of recognising learning only in rational terms, adult educators are challenged by how to begin teaching differently so that the affective dimension of learning begins to assume importance as well. Creating a teaching and learning space marked by high levels of trust and respect, that recognises and acknowledges the individual for who he or she is, that accepts that "emotions and our imaginative appraisal of them are integral to the process of meaning-making, to the ways we experience and make sense of ourselves, as well as on our relationships with others and with the world" (Dirkx, 2001, pp. 66-67) is the challenge faced by educators of adults, and for developing theory about how adults learn holistically.

This study aimed to examine how adults learn in the non-formal context of a home group bible study. I have considered some of the implications for the field of adult education, and in the next section I address the limitations and strengths of the study. I also provide recommendations for further research.

Strengths and limitations of study

Four limitations in this study are identified: the role of the researcher, generalisability of the findings, diversity of group, and theological considerations.

The role of a researcher is to devise research questions, collect data to answer these questions, distil the data, edit and interpret the resulting stories within a given theoretical framework. I am a white and middle-aged person who studied a fairly homogenous group, also predominantly white and middle-aged. Whilst I was able to hear the voice of a younger person, I missed an opportunity to gather data from a

person of another race. Given my history as a privileged person growing up in apartheid South Africa not hearing the voice of an other is a limitation of this study.

The size of the group is small, and owing to the voluntary nature of participation not all members were always present at every home group bible study. Because I wanted to hear an outsider's view of a person's learning I deliberately chose couples so that I could ask the partner if they had seen any changes in the other. In addition, the group self-selected as less than half the group was willing to write their reflections in a journal. As regards race and age, as stated previously, the group is fairly homogenous. The group's lack of diversity in a country marked by a multiplicity of lived experiences amongst its peoples remains a limitation of this study. Studies of more diverse groups could further such research.

Replicability is not an intention of the study and this case cannot be generalised to other studies. In this study the research looked to generate in-depth, holistic and situated understanding of adult learning in a bible study home group.   This remains a case study of a unique group. The members of this group share a particular history, which makes generalisation even to other fellowship groups within the same church impossible. At the time of my research study the group was involved in a particular programme. Their responses to the *Living the Question* programme and resulting learning is different from what they themselves had experienced before or since. However, the reader may well find aspects of this study which are related to their own examples of non-formal learning and which help them to understand such learning. This is a level of generalisation which I cannot plan for but which is reader-defined.

Lastly, because this study looked to explore how adults learn in a home group bible study through the theoretical lenses of adult learning theories there is no consideration given to exploring how God could be working in the lives of the participants and, as a result of this, be the cause of transformative learning. This is an opportunity for future research.

Two strengths of the study have been identified and are discussed here. The strengths are the methodology used and the benefits for the participants in the home group bible study.

Case study methodology aims to provide thick and rich descriptions of a unique incident, "to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there" (Merriam,

1998, p. 238). In exploring how adults learn in a home group bible study my research surfaced unexpected findings for me. Although the fellowship group had supported three terminally ill members or spouses over a short period they did not present any sign of post-traumatic stress whilst I was observing their bible study sessions. Having observed the group at bible study for some two months, it came as a surprise to hear the history of the group that was revealed during the semi-structured interviews. I was able to more deeply probe what for me was an emerging theme, that of a practice of relationship-building and development of trust. Had I used surveys or questionnaires to gather data from this group I could not have anticipated the existence of this history and its impact on the members of the group.

Case study methodology allowed me to probe deeply in exploring my research questions, and to offer a satisfactory response to these. The three key research questions were: what motivates participation in bible study; what is the nature and process of learning which occurs in bible study; and how does learning in bible study relate to personal development, family life, work life and societal needs? These questions have been vibrantly answered in the words and reflections of the case study participants, and analysed by me in the light of theoretical bases discussed in chapter two.

The participants in the case study mentioned to me that they enjoyed the experience of having to think about what and how they were learning during the period of my observations and interviews. Some of the case study participants reported benefits resulting from writing their reflections in journals. This group unconsciously identifies with being intellectual and thus enjoyed their reflections and a raised awareness of how they learn. A further strength was mentioned to me by Ruth, the group leader. She reported to me that the bible study home group had found my observations during the bible study sessions unobtrusive

> I must say that some people in the group were a bit anxious about you coming, but they felt that you were extremely professional the way you did manage to sit there with your mouth closed, being very unobtrusive in the background! And then some people really enjoyed the journal writing, those who managed to do it.

I now briefly cite a recommendation arising from this study regarding further research, and make a recommendation with respect to improving practice.

Recommendations for further research and practice

My research shows the importance of recognising and acknowledging that learning has more than a rational, cognitive dimension. Dirkx (1997, 2000, 2001) and Tisdell's (1999, 2008) holistic learning practice is powerfully illustrated in this case, where the bible study participants are enabled to act as a result of the affective dimension of their learning. Their affective learning equips them to understand the deep need for support and care by others, both within and outside of the group. Affective learning allows them to create an environment of trust, support and mutual respect. However, it should be noted that the role of emotions in learning is not that of enabling (or detracting from) cognitive learning. Extrarational ways of knowing, intuition and feelings exist in their own right and lead to holistic learning. To paraphrase Descartes it could be said, "I think, and feel, and relate! Therefore I am."

The agenda within home group bible study is less defined than it is within other more formal situations of learning. Creating opportunities for whole-person learning could be difficult especially in teaching circumstances that only recognise cognitive learning. Measuring affective, as contrasted with cognitive, learning is also challenging: how does a learner recognise that instantaneous moment of intuition, or interpret an emotion as it contributes to meaning-making in the moment?

This study also considered learning by adults in a home group bible study as it manifests as the development of faith. During the time of my study I discovered Fowler's (1974) faith development theory, which could provide a further opening for research into how adults make meaning through development of their faith.

Final reflections

I begin with a quote from the book of Matthew.

Matthew 22: 36-39 (Mark 12:28-34, Luke 10: 25-28)

> [36] "Teacher", he asked, "which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" [37] Jesus answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' [38] This is the greatest and most important commandment. [39] The second most important commandment is like it: 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself.'" (Good News Bible)

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My research intended to examine how and what adults in a bible study home group learn. I selected the quote above because it encapsulates the nature of the learning that I observed: the group members learnt about how to be in relationship with God, and showed this by demonstrating their love for their fellow man, both within the group and with others out of the group.

In my role as researcher I had a wonderful opportunity to study and understand a part of a community of practice, in a home group bible study, in which adults seek to make meaning of their lives and experiences. What emerged for me, as I collected more and more data, was a surprising story of grief, comfort and relationship. Although I have reported on the deaths of three members in or close to the group instrumentally, in no way do I wish to diminish what the group and their surviving spouses experienced and now live with. Taking my cue from the bible study group members who supported each other during this time it may seem that I give voice to a closed situation: matters have been dealt with and are now accepted by the group. This is not so. It is significant that the surviving spouses who remain in the group were not selected for semi-structured interviews, and this for no particular reasons other than they chose not to journal.

My theoretical framework used the lenses of learning in a community of practice and a variant of transformative learning, that of holistic learning. It was a humbling journey for me to witness dynamics in this community of practice where people grapple with how to express more loving ways of living with each other. No-one in the interviews, journals or observed sessions acknowledged or boasted of their obedience to God; in fact there were references made to how difficult this was.

I was also struck by how individuals dealt with their "bombshell" moments as they tried to make sense of the issues brought up in *Living the Questions* programme. Whilst it might be held that the nature of the group was intellectual and academic, and therefore might have been predisposed to grappling with difficult concepts, the group did not hesitate during the time of my study to continue with the programme. I am left wondering what impact the role of trust and relationship through deep connections with each other has when people are struggling to make sense of their faith and meaning.

Following on the period of data collection my husband and I were invited to become members of this same home group bible study. We are enjoying an experience, new in our marriage of some thirty and more years, of being part of a fellowship group. More recently a younger couple has joined, and I am aware of how we interact with the group as legitimate peripheral participants.

In this home group bible study I saw evidence of people loving their neighbour as they did themselves, even when they found it difficult to understand and do so.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Semi-structured Interview schedule

What brought you into home group bible study and for how long have you been involved in this, or any other home group bible study? (KRQ1)

Please provide a description of your home group bible study: who are the members, how were they selected, when does it happen, how often, what does a typical session look like, where do you meet, what influence does your church have in what topics/area is discussed (KRQ4)

Who is responsible for the agenda, purpose or procedure followed? What space is there for you to ask or debate points/set your own agenda? (KRQ2)

Can you think of any aha moments that have arisen in home group bible study? What led to this: who were the players, what was said/done? (KRQ2)

A small group setting allows people to have a voice, different from that experienced in a formal church setting. It also allows people to bring their whole self (personal, family, work and society situations) into worship, and so there is opportunity to hear about their concerns and celebrations. What part does this play in what happens in home group bible study, do you think this is appropriate/ key; does it provide you with insights or learning? (KRQ3)

Semi-structured Interview schedule (Prompt questions)

Let's talk about your bible study background: (KRQ 1)
When, and for how long have you attended bible study?
Have you only been involved in this, or any other home group bible study? Why did you choose this particular bible study?
What brought you into/prompted you to attend home group bible study?

Tell me about your experience in bible study – what is bible study like for you? (KRQ 2)
Please tell me about your personal history with bible study – attendance, positions of responsibility
Which studies have impacted you/your life the most?
What impact does bible study have by way of daily bible study/prayer/reflection/preparation?
What do you appreciate or dislike about how this bible study is organized?
Does attending bible study affect other activities you may be involved in?
What have you learned in bible study that has caused you to question any views or attitudes you held? Can you give me an example?
Did comparing your behavior to what you know God expects/Jesus modeled ever make

you feel uncomfortable? How did you deal with this?

Please provide a description of your home group bible study: who are the members, how were they selected, when does it happen, how often, what does a typical session look like, where do you meet, what influence does your church have in what topics/area is discussed

Who is responsible for the agenda, purpose or procedure followed? What space is there for you to ask or debate points/set your own agenda?

Can you think of any aha moments that have arisen in home group bible study? What led to this: who were the players, what was said/done?

A small group setting allows people to have a voice, different from that experienced in a formal church setting. It also allows people to bring their whole self (personal, family, work and society situations) into worship, and so there is opportunity to hear about their concerns and celebrations. What part does this play in what happens in home group bible study, do you think this is appropriate/ key; does it provide you with insights or learning?

How did what you have learnt in bible study affect your faith? (KRQ 3)

Did your prayer life change in any way? If so, how?

What did you learn about God from the bible study?

Did your relationship with God change after prolonged bible study and prayer? How?

Do you enjoy reading the Bible now?

Can you briefly describe your devotional practice?

How did participating in bible study affect your relationship with others – your husband/wife/partner, children, friends, relatives? (KRQ 3)

Have you made new friends through bible study?

Has your relationship with your spouse changed?

Relationships with friends and colleagues changed?

What do others say about your participation in bible study?

Do you treat your children differently as a result of attending bible study?

Did life goals change as a result of participating in bible study?

Did you change your view of the world?

How do you view people of different faiths?

Attitudes towards neighbours?

How do you view social issues facing this country – education, health?

Do you believe government can deliver on its promises to make a better life for all? How? Why?

Since starting with bible study have you faced any of life's transitions – births, deaths, marriage, divorce, job change, health problems, retirement etc? (KRQ 3)

If yes, has what you have learnt in bible study helped navigate these transitions? (Please take time to explain these)

What volunteer activities have you/do you participated in?

How has attending bible study affected personal choices you have made?

Is there any way that we have not yet discussed about how attending bible study may have affected your attitudes or worldview? (KRQ 3)

Is this learning experience one you would recommend to others? Why? If so, what would you say to convince them to attend?

Appendix 2

Informed Consent Document

I am conducting case study research into home group bible study with a view to describing and analysing the learning of three participants involved in this community of practice. I hope that my research will reveal what learning takes place in the context of a small group bible study, its purpose and impact on personal and social development through interviews, observation of your home group bible study and analysis of responses and interpretation of the data.

Dr Vaughn John is my Research Supervisor, and he may be contacted on email at JohnV@ukzn.ac.za or telephonically on 033 260 5069.

With permission of your home group bible study leader, and every member of the group, I would also request to observe (and make field notes) some of your home group bible study sessions. You and your group will not be identified by name in my research.

I would also request that you complete a reflective journal, provided by me, for a period of a month. The journal will record your thoughts and feelings about the home group bible study sessions, and your entries will be read by me for the purposes of developing a deeper understanding of your learning experiences. I will make copies of the entries for record-keeping purposes, and then return the journals to you if you would like to continue the practice of journaling.

I may like to interview you, and make a voice recording, about your reflections about what happens at a personal level in a home group bible study, your motivation for participating in this form of worship, what you understand to be the purpose of home group bible study, and how this impacts you in your daily living. The interview of an hour would take place at your disposal after the next 4 weeks. If I have any enquiries after transcribing the interview may I please communicate with you over email for clarification? You will not be identified by name in my research.

The recordings and transcriptions of the interview and copy of the journal will be on record with the University of KwaZulu-Natal for five years.

I hope that your input will offer insights into the purpose and dynamics of home group bible study. I'm hoping that it will also provide me with a framework to conduct my research.

I understand that time constraints or other factors may count against my request for an interview. If you are willing to be interviewed please note that your participation is voluntary and that you may withdraw from the study at any stage and for any reason.

DECLARATION

I …………………………………………………………………………………………………(full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, without any prejudice, should I so desire.

…………………………………………………………………….   ……………………………………………

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT   DATE

Appendix 3

Reflective Journal briefing

Thank you for agreeing to place your thoughts and feelings on record, and for the time given to this task. I would like you to keep a record of your reflections on bible study sessions attended over the course of a month. The purpose of the journal, which will be read by me and perhaps by my supervisor, is to provide more data on your learning experiences in bible study. Your responses remain confidential and you or your group will not be identified by name or in any way.

General notes

Please write freely and by hand. If you feel it necessary you may edit and make corrections by crossing out where appropriate. Please don't concern yourself with grammar and spelling. If needed may I contact you to clarify any points?

Please record the date and time of your journal entry, and please try to record the entry near to the time of the home group bible study session, within 12 hours of the session.

Please note the content of the bible study and if it is part of a programme that your group is following.

Please also note any preparation required or made for the session.

You are invited to reflect on any or all of the following points:

- What did you understand to be the purpose of today's bible study?
- What did you hear today that was interesting or surprising, and from whom?
- What new concepts did you learn today?
- Did anything of what was debated and discussed today cause you to re-evaluate your viewpoint on a matter? Do you still hold to your belief about the

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matter, or has your thinking shifted?

- What are you still unsure about?
- What experiences did you bring into the dialogue?
- Did you withhold any experiences appropriate to the dialogue? For what reason?
- What did you already know?
- What did you learn today that relates to what you know?
- What questions came up for you?
- Do you still have unanswered questions? What will you do to resolve this?
- Do you have any half-formed thoughts that have come out of today's session?
- Did you consider something to be true, but after today's session you are reconsidering it?
- Was anything left out of the discussion?
- How would you describe your feelings after participating in today's bible study?
- What did you learn today that you may be able to use in the future?
- What did you like or enjoy today?
- What did you not like or enjoy today?
- Were there any particularly strong images that remain with you?
- Have you formed any ideas for action based on today's bible study?
- What is still on your mind?
- What interesting questions for you came up?

Appendix 4

Observation schedule

Observations of bible study would seek to gather data on:

- Format of bible study, including time, place and setting (KRQ 4)
- Broad description of participants' profile (KRQ 4)
- How agenda is agreed, and what agenda is (KRQ 4)
- Topics and/or themes covered (KRQ 4)
- Participation patterns (KRQ 2)
- Leadership patterns (KRQ 2)
- Incidents of agreement, disagreement, clarity, awareness or discomfort (KRQ 2)
- Reflections on personal experience in relation to biblical meaning (KRQ 2/3)
- Relationships between biblical message and broader life (KRQ 3)

Appendix 5 Turnitin Report (Page 1)

A full report is available on request

Abstract Home Group Bible Studies, Fellowship Groups, or Home Cells, to name a few, provide an opportunity for worshipping Christians to meet on a frequent basis for varied reasons but most often to study and learn from the Bible. The existing adult education literature on this international and local practice is scant. This dissertation explores a case of nonformal learning by adults in a Johannesburg-based Methodist home group bible study. The theoretical lenses used to explore the learning of six adults are Lave and Wenger's

(Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) Community of Practice **212**
theory, **and**

Dirkx (Dirkx, 2000, 2001; Dirkx, Mezirow, & Cranton, 2006), English (English, 2000; English & Gillen, 2000) and Tisdell's (Tisdell, 1999, 2008) Holistic Learning theories. Dirkx's (2001) theory of holistic learning is situated as a critique of Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory. The research is conducted in the interpretive paradigm. Case study methodology is used to richly describe the learning and change in three couples within a home group bible study in the context of the home church and Methodism more generally. Data collection methods include observations of home group bible study sessions, semi-structured interviews, programme notes from the bible study programme followed, and journals written by five of the six participants. i The analysis of the data

takes as its point of departure the voices of the **206**

participants, and the description and history of the home group. This study provides opportunity to theorise the learning and changes experienced by the members of this nonformal adult education enterprise, and to contribute to existing literature. Whilst the bible study home group as a whole and the case study participants in particular foreground their learning as rational, cognitive and academic, this study reveals the multidimensionality of their learning. The most significant learning in action is situated within the affective learning domain. Extrarational ways of knowing, intuition and feelings exist in their own right and lead to holistic learning. ii Declaration I, Vivienne Susan Spooner,

declare that (i) The research reported in this thesis, except where **1**
otherwise indicated, is my original work. (ii) This thesis has not
been submitted for any degree or examination at any other university.
(iii) This thesis does not contain other persons' data, pictures, graphs or
other information, unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced
from other persons. (iv) This thesis does not contain other persons'

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    Meaning, Context, and Process of
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