# The community of learning is in the Baobab tree — how the branches stay together in the context of professional preparation

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*This article explores how participation in a community of learning supported transformation on a personal and professional level in a Master's programme at a South African university. It draws on the concept of transformational learning in the professional preparation of educational psychologists, and how such learning plays out in the development of critical perspectives and shifts in personal paradigms. We report on a two-year ethnographic study that involved 13 of a total of 15 students enrolled for an Educational Psychology Master's course. One of us (CW) acted as participant observer in the study and recorded the experiences of the participants through reflective letters that included symbolic metaphors, semi-structured group focus interviews, as well as a verification questionnaire. In our analysis and inter-pretation we used the metaphor of the Baobab tree, 'the tree turned upside down', because it is known for its resilience, holding capacity and continuous growth. We found the image to powerfully represent the dynamics of professional preparation and transformation in higher education.*

## Introduction

Learning communities have been recognised in the literature as being effective for promoting student learning and success (Huerta & Bray, 2008) in higher education (Boyer, 1990) through, for example, curricular, classroom, residential and student-type communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Laufgraben & Shapiro, 2004). The value of learning communities lies in the ways in which active participation and the sharing of responsibility are promoted (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004). This value is translated in small group sizes that encourage the establishment of support networks, as well as the collaborative effort of lecturing staff. Furthermore, the sharing of a common vision where learning outcomes receive prominence and the programme delivery is community based, allows for the promotion of critical reflection on the students' experiences (Price, 2005; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999).

According to Botha, Reid, Wilson and Mohape (2007) collaborative learning has many advantages, which include fuller participation on the part of the learners, opportunities to share information, skills and knowledge, and the development and exercising of social skills required for future practice. Often these capacities, referred to as *lifelong learning* (Schutte, 2003), become essential in a rapidly changing society. Communities of learning have the potential to contribute to meaningful experiences as members contribute to the learning of others. In fact, *membership and meaning* and *belonging while learning* are considered factors that are im-portant to successful learning (Osman & Castle, 2006) as well as to transformative learning.

Several authors recognise the need to clarify the transformational benefit of learning

communities (Brower & Dettinger, 1998; Collay, Dunlap, Enloe & Gagnon, 1998). Smith *et al*. (2004) state that a learning community needs to strive for *transformative impact* – an impact that would from a critical psychology perspective involve a shift away from individualistic practices to more collaborative community learning experiences (Prilleltensky & Nelson, cited in Holmes, 2006). It would also involve, according to Cummings (2006) and Schutte (2003), an emphasis on both the professional and the personal development of participants, to the extent that previous assumptions and thoughts are evaluated and filtered (Steyn, 2004). With this study we therefore raise questions pertaining to the experiences of a group of students who over two years developed a community of learning that supported (on various levels) their personal and professional development. The specific purpose was to analyse how they grew together as a learning community, in order to understand how such experiences contribute to transformational learning.

## Theoretical framework

The epistemological position central to professional Master's programmes focuses on the development of knowledge in community and as such, a social constructivist point of view is relevant. Our understanding is that knowledge is 'actively built by learners as they shape and build mental frameworks to make sense of their environments' (Shapiro & Levine, 1999:3). Hence learning is perceived as a process that extends to our lived experience of participation in the world (Wenger, 1998b; Wenger, 2000; Kilpatrick, Barret & Jones, 2003; Smith *et al*. 2004). Through these social processes, peers and adults who are more competent in the attainment of skills assist others through the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in attaining new levels of understanding (Lloyd & Fernyhough, 1999).

The theory of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) received prominence in the middle eighties. It emphasises how experiences are reinterpreted through newly constructed assumptions, resulting in an alternative understanding and perception of the experience. The focus shifted from learning for *information* ('what we know') to learning for *transformation* ('how we know') as indicated by Baumgartner (2003:18). This shift allowed for a greater emphasis on the relationship between theory and practice.

Mezirow's (2000:7) definition of transformative learning as "the process by which we *transform* our taken-for-granted frames of reference" is very relevant to our inquiry. It assumes that the catalyst for transformation involves nurturing discourses of a constructive nature and questioning values, beliefs, learning and assumptions through various life events (Mezirow, 2000). This is extremely important in the professional preparation of educational psychologists, for example, in situations where values and assumptions may be held that can stand in the way of a positive regard of the client. In such situations transformative learning is required which would, in Mezirow's terms, develop new perspectives that are more "inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective" (Mezirow, 2000:7). This ideal of transformative learning is relevant to changes in personal and professional paradigms (Taylor 2000, cited in Merriam, 2004) and the focus of analyses of learning community activities. Educational psychologists specifically are guided towards becoming reflective practitioners "with a new way of seeing that leads to an enhanced personal capacity and a deepened sense of social justice" (Harris, Lowery-Moore & Farrow, 2008:322).

Critical reflection is used to revisit historically and culturally anchored assumptions, prejudice and values underpinning old perceptions (Barkhuizen & Gravett, 2001). An experience that confronts the individual with a sense of disequilibrium — as is the case in the

training of Educational Psychology students, where they purposefully have to engage with their life histories and preconceived ideas about people, learning, development and wellness — holds the promise of a deeper insight that can result in transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). In the case of Master's students, the transformation of their world view typically includes an experience of disorientation. For instance, the students are guided to scrutinise their world views and develop a self-awareness where feelings of fear, anger, guilt and/or shame emerge as they realise their own vulnerability to prejudiced thinking based on their past experiences and cultural roots. In such experiences, students would make a critical assessment of assumptions and preconceived ideas regarding the world and people, realising that the process of transformation is shared by others — especially within the context of community learning (see Mezirow, 2000).

The transformation of perspective is encouraged though open communication and the sharing of experiences with one another (Mezirow, 1991), both of which encourage the revision of original and the subsequent exploration of alternative belief systems. This would then lead to determining a plan of action, obtaining knowledge and skills in order to actualise the new plans, and experimenting with new roles required within a particular domain such as Educational Psychology. The transformation of perspective would also allow for negotiating relationships, enhancing confidence in the new roles and relationships, and finally a re-integration of the new perspectives in the students' lives as determined by the requirements for that perspective (see Barkhuizen & Gravett, 2001; Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 1991).

Based on the perspectives discussed above, it seems appropriate to consider professional preparation programmes as opportunities where participants construct knowledge in community with others, not only for the benefit of gaining theoretical knowledge relevant to the professional practice, but especially for the sake of personal development.

## Method of study
### Research design
The present research study was conducted from a basic interpretive and descriptive qualitative approach, according to the guidelines provided by Merriam and Associates (2002). The research revealed how participating in a research community facilitated transformation on the level of the personal and professional development of the students involved. The study was designed as an ethnographical and grounded-theory inquiry as the research question explored the 'way of being' of the Master's students in Educational Psychology and reflected on their two-year involvement in the programme. Applying an ethnographic design (Spindler & Spindler, 1987), one of us (CW) engaged as practitioner ethnographer (Barton, 2008) and engaged in the research as participant observer. She acknowledged her personal experiences during the process of data collection which was facilitated through the trusting relationship with participants. This allowed for what Marshall and Rossman (1999) call a rich mix of data collection. Based on the need to work inductively and develop a data-based construction of how the learning community was established and maintained throughout the professional programme, Charmaz's (2006) grounded-theory framework of data analysis was utilised.

### Research context
The research was conducted in the Faculty of Education at a higher education institution where Master's students in Educational Psychology are trained. The training programme was of a part-time nature and comprised weekly contact sessions on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons

with occasional workshops on Saturdays. Students were expected to complete eight course modules over the two-year time span. Classes were presented mostly in workshop format and were experiential in design, requiring of students to complete group assignments and presentations. This in effect encouraged students to work together, to learn from each other and in the process to confront their own assumptions and prejudices about different cultures, religions, sexual orientation, personality types and learning styles. Students were encouraged to work in different groups over the two years so as to enhance their learning experiences through their engagement with different people in the group.

Participants
Fifteen Educational Psychology Master's students enrolled at a university in Gauteng for the period 2005 to 2006 participated in the study. Their ages ranged from 22 to 50 years old. Nine students were white (speaking English and Afrikaans), three black and one Asian, while two students were male and the remaining 13 female. The majority of the group were full-time teachers. A diverse group of students was selected, based on the selection criteria according to the requirements of the Health Professions Council of South Africa. Fourteen participants consented to take part in the research during the course of their Educational Psychology internship programme — however, only 13 actively contributed to the data collection.

Data collection and gathering
Every month the group met for group supervision, as all were completing their internship year, and it was before and after these supervision sessions that data was gathered. By scheduling the interviews at a time when the participants were together, the group focus interviews could be conducted with as many participants as possible. It also reduced unnecessary travelling, which allowed time to be utilised effectively in a very busy internship year.

After informed written consent was obtained, data was collected from the participants in the form of a reflective letter (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) in response to the following questions:
1.  How did you experience the learning process and the group you interacted with over the two years?
2.  How did this Master's group influence your learning?
3.  How did these experiences allow for personal and professional development?
After they wrote the reflective letters, the participants were divided into two groups and a symbol focus group interview (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005) was conducted with them. Interviewees were requested to bring a symbol that encapsulated the gist of their reflective letters, so that this could be elaborated on during the focus group interview. The symbols served as metaphors for exploration, with the understanding that "metaphors allow us to understand one domain of experience in terms of another" (Botha, 2005:403). Metaphors, whether in verbal or in symbolic format, can provide insights into changes experienced by an individual over a certain time period (Sumsion, 2002). The symbols informed the various semi-structured focus group interviews (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). As participant observer, CW also wrote a reflective letter and selected a symbol based on her experience of personal and professional development in the course of the academic programme. This is in line with Meulenberg-Buskens's (1997) view that the personal involvement of social sciences researchers with their research is seen as crucial to the quality

of their study, even more so in the case of ethnographic research where the researcher is also a participant member of a group.

## Data analysis

Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim. Using Charmaz's (in Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) open coding system, each line, sentence and paragraph was read and coded. Data analysis commenced through line-by-line coding to explore what the participants were trying to communicate about their experiences. This allowed for *level 1* coding (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999) using *in vivo coding* (Charmaz, 2006:55), which served to preserve the participants' meaning of their views and actions in the coding process. This was followed by *level II* coding, in which the constant comparative method was applied. Codes were subsequently clustered together to allow for *level III* coding (Streubert & Carpenter, 1999) and for the development of themes.

The themes identified by means of content coding and categorisation (Neuendorf, 2002) were sent to the participants as a verification questionnaire that consisted of incomplete sentences. This allowed each of the participants to reflect on their personal professional development in terms of "systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and the development of personal qualities necessary for the education of professional and technical duties…" (Guest, 1999:2). In doing so, they were able to explore how the learning community played a role in their growth. Apart from assigning codes to ensure organisation and ease of retrieval (Miles & Huberman, 1994), the process of data analysis involved the unitisation of the data into meaningful segments (Maykut & Moorehouse, 1994).

## Trustworthiness

With regard to this study, the authors documented the research process in detail. They used Creswell's (2002) strategies to ensure and demonstrate the accuracy and authenticity of the work through the triangulation of data sources. Triangulation involved reflective letter documentation, focus group interviews and a verification questionnaire. Moreover, credibility was pursued as rich descriptions were elicited through prolonged engagement, persistent observation and (as already mentioned) the triangulation of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The participant observer also acknowledged possible bias brought to the research and this was monitored through the supervision process (Creswell, 2002) and documented in a personal researcher journal. CW therefore engaged in a process of reflexivity so as to differentiate between her own experiences and those of the involved participants (Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Pellatt, 2003).

## Ethical considerations

After discussing the purpose of the study with each of the participants, they were invited to participate on the understanding that their confidentiality and anonymity would be ensured and that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time without negative consequences. Although the participants were known to the participant observer, anonymity was ensured when the data were presented and analysed through the use of codes. These codes were essential to the process as the participants were known to the supervisors of the research. The study adhered to all the requirements of the tertiary institution and was overseen by the faculty ethics committee.

## Results

The following themes emerged from the data in relation to the question as to how participation in a community of learning supported transformation on a personal and professional level in a Master's programme at a South African university.

The two main themes as indicated by the participants in the learning community, namely, 'Sense of Support and Coherence' and 'Personal and Professional Growth' (with the latter's developed subcategories) are presented below:

## Sense of support and coherence

*Others lent a hand when I felt too tired to lift my own…*

What emerged from the findings was the sense of support the students enjoyed through the learning community. Many of the course assignments were constructed in such a way that members had to work in a group. Although this contributed towards pressure, engaging in a group resulted in students investing the energy needed to meet the programme demands: … *there was the time pressure, but working in groups, we also had to perform, you couldn't let the rest down, or yourself down ... and that brought out that need for support*… [GFI4/T/H/7].

Collaboration, sharing and a feeling of belonging all contributed to the sense of oneness experienced within the group. Individual challenges were managed better due to the sense of togetherness and all finding themselves in the 'same boat', so to speak. The learning community as such provided an environment of support and sharing: … *the concept of holding hands — feeling their support — that we are in it together. A sense of belonging that somehow encourages one to keep going…* [RL/T/R/1].

While the larger group of 15 provided a learning space for knowledge to be shared and expanded upon, smaller groups within the bigger group facilitated security, commonality, identity and, in some cases, friendship. This assisted with learning being multiplied and then shared across groups: .…*there is always someone you could and can work with ... you need to learn and lean on each other…* [SI1/T/P/3]. It was this community that promoted learning, sharing, growth and development.

Engaging in a community of learning confronted individuals with perceptions of either carrying a heavier workload than others or not contributing sufficiently compared to others. A student who initially felt guilty because of the perception of not having so much to offer to the group, had the following to say:

> *…by interacting and getting their views and understanding what people are thinking, and not only focusing on myself at all times; all about me not being able to do stuff…; and the community helped me challenge those perceptions … I realise that their views helped my personal journey — I'm not just a parasite, I have something to share that is valuable…* [GFI/F/5].

This realisation was extremely important, considering the different knowledge domains the participants had mastered, based on the cultural diversity of the group. In group assignments, some students would accept the responsibility for developing the PowerPoint presentations, whilst others would contribute knowledge pertaining to a cultural practice and others brought topical knowledge. Learning to value these different contributions supported the sense of cohesion among participants.

## Personal and professional growth

The journey towards personal and professional growth often challenged the students and

caused anxiety as they engaged with their past histories. They were confronted with tasks they felt incompetent to perform and experienced a learning process that was not lecturer driven.

## Coming to terms with past experiences — from anxiety to potential

Initially students experienced a disorientation dilemma when they had to complete assignments that demanded from them to reflect on their own past — often a past that housed unexplored and unresolved trauma. Students subsequently questioned their own ability to participate in a community of psychologists and render assistance to others if they themselves were vulnerable. By sharing their personal experiences with one another, they came to realise that their own histories held insights that could assist them in their professional practice, provided they came to terms with their respective past experiences.

## Personal growth — gaining wisdom

Personal inadequacies and fears were addressed as students were challenged to participate in activities that they initially perceived as daunting, such as presenting in front of the class or making PowerPoint presentations:

> *Personal learning about self — when presenting I experienced uncontrollable anxiety; … adding therapeutic aspect to course, helping each other to move from unrealistic fear …; realised through support of lecturing community; … I was able to become aware of what was prohibiting me of achieving potential;… there were readily available support structures…* [GFI/K/7].

## Changed perceptions about learning

Frustrations were also highlighted in the data. Comments made by the participants alluded to the fact that the students wanted the lecturers to act as 'the experts' and when this need was not met, the students felt frustrated. Their previous learning experiences conditioned them to believe that lecturers/ teachers were supposed to 'teach' and students/learners to 'absorb'. The participants acknowledged that even though there were frustrations associated with the learning community, it helped to prepare them as future educational psychologists for a future that would also be riddled with frustrations:

> *… the frustration that I endured … I've learnt a lesson from that … because I'm going to get clients that will take a long time to warm up and to, um, to connect with me, and I've got to deal with that frustration … but on the other hand I also need to realise that sometimes a client may not connect, and that client may not, um, the client may just, um, contribute to more frustrations as a psychologist … and then I need to refer that client 'cause I cannot work with that client…* [SI2/T/M/7].

The following excerpts speak of transformative learning where the students experienced change on a personal level.

> *…always through reflection where I realise that I've changed so much, changed within the past two years, I'm a different person in the way I am with others, with children … I'm more wiser, so (to) me a learning community means changes in yourself; your knowledge … and it's because of this diverse community … each and every member of this community came with their own uniqueness, and that uniqueness was the great experience that I had, that I learnt from…* [GFI/H/1].

One of the students who was already quoted earlier initially felt guilty for apparently not having so much to offer to the group:

> *…by interacting and getting their views and understanding what people are thinking, and not only focusing on myself at all times; all about me not being able to do stuff…; and the community helped me challenge those perceptions … I realise that their views helped my personal journey – I'm not just a parasite, I have something to share that is valuable…* [GFI/F/5].

The student's perception of learning was changed due to the manner in which the programme was presented:

> *...in this learning community we learnt that we didn't have to have everything to get ahead, but it's about serving our clients best; as a life lesson for psychologists, we don't have everything, it's about lifelong learning…; it's about learning to support others to be a better psychologist ... at the end it wasn't about marks, there is more to process than marks, and if you focus just on marks, you lose out on what the learning community has to offer…* [GFI/P/3].

As such, taking on the role of Educational Psychologist demanded personal as well as professional development (Cummings, 2006):

> *…always through reflection where I realise that I've changed so much, changed within the past two years; I'm a different person ... in the way I am with others, with children…; I'm more wiser, so to me a learning community means changes in yourself, your knowledge; ... and it's because of this diverse community ... each and every member of this community came with their own uniqueness, and that uniqueness was the great experience that I had, that I learnt from; ... these changes have prepared me for my future profession — I'm a lot more calmer ... I'm more focused and relaxed and I seem to have developed an understanding on how to deal with people…* [GFI1/T/H/3].

## Discussion of the findings

In our interpretation and discussion of findings we explored and utilised the image of the Baobab tree to help us understand, make sense of and synthesise the data. The Baobab is a tree synonymous with African tradition and culture due to its bountiful contribution in terms of food, shelter and diverse usage of the bark — from the making of cork and rope to tiling a roof (Pakenham, 2004; Siyabona Africa, 2007; Department of Water Affairs and Forestry, South Africa, 2007). The researchers decided to use this metaphor, since it emerged as a metaphor from the group itself:

> *The baobab tree was a powerful symbol in our group. Symbols of resilience amongst the harshest elements are closely linked with this 'tree of life'. The multiple ways in which it is used, the shade, the many resources it provides and the valuable part it plays in the ecology, are all indicative of the importance and value it carries and potentially has to offer.*

Another participant confirmed, saying

> *… when you are so dry that tree is there to quench that thirst ... that tree is there to quench that thirst for knowledge that we so much desired ... so, ah, that is where you get it from, from that baobab tree ... and even in our association together from the group….*

It can be argued that in a country like South Africa, where educational policy (Engelbrecht, Green, Naicker & Engelbrecht, 1999) highlights the importance of collaborative learning that underpins the framework and spirit in which '*ubuntu*' is understood, learning communities in higher education could be more utilised. *Ubuntu*, as explained by Kruger, Lifschitz and Baloyi (2007:332) "is the essence of being a person. It means we are people through other people. We

cannot be fully human alone". Therefore we learn through others too, and only then best serve the communities in which we function. With the legacy of apartheid still being felt in many higher education institutions — particularly in psychology, with the masses not receiving adequate intervention — it stands to reason that a learning community could offer much with regard to students' being able to complete the course and earn a qualification, in contrast to what has been seen in previous years (Holmes, 2006).

Just as the baobab tree is seen as being *turned upside down* (Pakenham, 2004:14), learning communities also have the potential to turn upside down the way in which psychologists are professionally prepared. No longer should individualist, typical westernised practices, where the emphasis falls on individualised learning measured against the final results, be used to train South African psychologists. South Africa, a country presenting with immense demands for social support and networks, too little human resources and vastly different cultural views, requires the training of its psychologists to acknowledge the indigenous knowledge that each student brings to the programme. The call made by Prillentensky and Nelson (2002) should be heeded: training and preparation that are supportive and reflective of the society in which they operate should be preferred, i.e. where transformative learning can equip mental health professionals to engage in mass therapeutic and community intervention.

The baobab tree is known for its resilience. It survives in harsh landscapes with the ability to store hundreds of litres of water when seasons of drought are expected (Siyabona Africa, 2007). This alludes to the resilience required by Educational Psychology students to survive in a part-time programme that demands a lot in terms of time, integrating theory with practice and personal transformation. It is this resilience that will ensure their continuous growth as educational psychologists in a landscape where school communities are confronted with numerous challenges.

This large tree usually serves as a meeting place for animals that seek solace from the sun under its huge branches and for the community that it sustains. The learning community likewise provided a space where individuals from varying backgrounds and with diverse experiences could meet and share experiences. Within this meeting area, development took place as the skills required in a professional sphere were practised, expanded and maintained, starting from the personal level.

The learning community offered support in terms of physical resources, emotional motivation and friendship, and provided a space where skills could be practised without judgement. This space needed to evolve, based on trusted modelling that provided opportunities for critical personal reflection and promoted transformative learning in student educational psychologists. Therefore it is argued that the training programme of these students provided far more than just an academic component of theoretical training. Through reflective facilitation the training programme supported not only theoretical learning, but learning of a personal nature too (Cummings, 2006). This sense of belonging has been well documented in studies of learning communities (Wenger, 1998a; Wenger, 2007; Tinto, 1999) and the researchers found that when the participants felt they belonged, they were more willing to share and learn from others. Wenger (2007) stated at a recent conference that higher learning institutions have become centres of loneliness and that the learning community offers a bridge towards connectedness which we as authors argue is vital in the process of transformative learning.

A baobab tree can support and create its own ecosystem (Siyabona Africa, 2007) with birds nesting in its branches; baboons eating the fruit, and bush babies and bats drinking the

nectar and pollinating the flowers. The baobab's leaves are also used for medicinal purposes. Not only were the members of this learning community diverse in terms of their age, race, gender, experience and indigenous knowledge, but also in terms of those defined as part of this community. By exposing the learning community to as many diverse learning opportunities as possible, these educational psychologists were better prepared for the diversity of clients they would be expected to work with.

Mills (1999) refers to experiences as providing the stories to which human beings can stay connected. Expanding on this, Clinchy in Cross (1998:6) refers to experiences in learning communities as "connected conversations in which each person serves as midwife to each other person's thoughts, and builds on the other's ideas". The analogy of a midwife brings the process of birth to mind, which in our opinion is in essence what transformative learning is all about. According to Mezirow (1991), transformative learning involves a reinterpretation (a rebirth if you wish) of one's assumptions, beliefs and (dare we say) values, addressing the heart of an individual's meaning schemes and perspectives.

The findings spoke of commonalities evident in this learning community (Tinto, 1999). The students had to share knowledge and in the process they developed shared knowing not only about the context, but also about individual strengths and uniqueness in others. According to Wenger (1998a:34) "one's own knowing is enhanced when other voices are a part of that learning experience". The students had to share responsibility, becoming mutually dependent on each other and advancing together, based on their collective efforts. Their learning was therefore not merely focused on the content of theories or the accumulation of the highest marks, but involved a scrutiny — at times uncomfortable and anxiety-provoking — of their own identity and the manner in which they viewed others, their learning and being.

By supporting and encouraging the learning community, members functioned as support networks for each other. They addressed the respective emotional needs experienced and thereby contributed to success and professional development. Added to this are the diverse and varied roles that an educational psychologist is expected to play — ranging from collaborator and researcher to advocator and lifelong learner, to mention a few (Louw, 2006). It would therefore stand to reason that the training and preparation of these students would need to prepare them for these diverse roles. This can obviously not be achieved in the homogeneous groups that are typical of South African training programmes. Our experience indicated that students learn more when their learning environment correlates with the diverse contexts in which they are required to practise.

In the future, especially within the context of South Africa, the practice of Educational Psychology will demand from psychologists the ability to initiate transformation, not only on an individual therapeutic level, but especially within the context of school communities. Even though children are our primary clients, we acknowledge the influence wielded by the adults in their world. Addressing the learning barriers of children implies addressing the barriers of the adults. The educational psychologist will have to rise to the challenge of addressing biases, prejudice and assumptions still entrenched within the school systems, based on the political and discriminatory past of South Africa. As such it will require first-hand knowledge of how a learning community can assist in transformative learning. The training of educational psychologists therefore needs to provide a solid foundation where their experiences of transformative learning are facilitated through a caring learning community. Such a caring community forces the individual to look inwards, to expose the vulnerabilities entrenched in rigid thinking and to experience the power of dismantling own intrinsic barriers so as to embrace the potential that others hold.

## Conclusion

The present study has highlighted the academic as well as emotional support that the learning community offered, acknowledging the sharing of intellectual, emotional, social and practical resources. It was in this safe learning space where one could develop not only professional skills, but especially personal ones. The challenging of personal perceptions and the enabling process of learning about diverse personalities supported students' preparation for a profession were this would occur and also be required. An interesting finding revealed by our study concerned the fact that the participants saw the learning community as evolutionary; a dynamic mechanism that altered based on trust, goal and need. The participants also extended the learning community beyond the members of the Educational Psychology Master's group to include lecturers, community practicum sites, family and life experience.

According to Wenger (1998a) this collective effort or social participation within the community is the key to informal learning. Engagement within this social practice is the fundamental process by which we learn and so become who we are. Hence we argue that through learning in learning communities, transformative learning can be facilitated. As Wenger (1998b:263) most aptly writes, "Education is not merely formative — it is transformative".

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