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# LEARNER CONTROL IN UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE LEARNING: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES

By

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ABSTRACT

LEARNER CONTROL IN UNDERGRADUATE ONLINE LEARNING: INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES

By

Simone Jurate Jonaitis

This dissertation describes and examines instructor's observations of the following four aspects of undergraduate online learning: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence.

Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted with instructors from a variety of disciplines teaching an undergraduate course online. This qualitative study examines the extent to which instructors in online environments consider the specific factors that impact students' learning experiences, as well as explores ways in which the learner can be encouraged to be more conscious of and engaged in the learning process.

Several recommendations emerge for instructors of online learning as well as recommendations for institutional policy. Recommendations for online instructors include identification of the learner's expectations and motivations, engagement of the learner through writing, and the construction of shared learning objectives. Recommendations for institutional policy include identification of the institutional purpose of the online programming, formal mentoring and learning opportunities for instructors of online instruction, and commitment to innovation.

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# CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION OF THE STUDY

## Introduction

Many institutions of higher education are engaging in distance education, particularly in the form of Internet or online courses and programs. It is estimated that almost half (41%) of schools with less than 3000 enrolled students and 95% of institutions with enrollments over 10,000, offer some form of distance education opportunities (GOA-04-78T -2003). According to the National Center for Education Statistics report, *The Condition of Education 2004,* enrollments in distance education almost doubled from 1997 to 2001. Although these figures include all distance education modalities and are not specifically limited to online offerings, they do illustrate the extent to which institutions of higher education continue to expand distance education offerings to learners.

Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) submit that the growing need for lifelong learning opportunities for adults, as well as a predicted growth in college-age learners, will only increase the demand for access to higher education and that quite possibly distance education, particularly online Internet-based opportunities will, "provide a solution to capacity constraints [that] growing enrollments place on the current higher education infrastructure." In addition, more and more learners are faced with the demands of work, family, and financial obligations. Furthermore, The National Center for Education Statistics reports 79% of the undergraduate population is employed at least part-time. This type of changing behavior and demographic among college age students creates a demand for flexibility and convenience which has increased the appeal of distance education formats, particularly online instruction.

In support of this observation, numerous studies and discussions of online learning have found convenience and flexibility of format as one of the main, if not the primary, reasons for selection over traditional face-to-face formats (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2002; Andrusyszyn, Cragg, & Humbert, 2001; Clark & Jones, 2001; Doherty, 2002; Grill, 1999; Roblyer, 1999; and Valenta, Therriault, Dieter, & Mrtek, 2001).

However, as institutions continue to expand distance education offerings, and despite the actual and perceived benefits, attrition and dropout rates continue to be higher in online programming than those of traditional face-to-face instruction (Grill, 1999; Kennedy, 2000; Rovai, 2003; and Zielinski, 2000). This information directs researchers not only to ask why attrition is higher in online learning environments; it also directs researchers, learners, instructors, and institutions to deconstruct the various components of teaching and learning online and to ask if and how specific aspects of the experience influence the learning experience. Most importantly, how can the teaching and learning experience of online environments be improved? Do the traditional roles of instructor and learner change in online learning environments? If so, how have they changed and how can the individual instructor, learner and institution best accommodate these changes? Ultimately, how can the online teaching and learning experience be enhanced and maximized to best meet the expectations and learning outcomes of the individuals involved in the experience?

## Statement of Problem

It is undeniable that the Worldwide Web has impacted academia. In addition to providing an alternative means of instructional delivery, the Worldwide Web has also impacted the traditional dynamic of teaching and learning. Learners now have more

choices than the traditional face-to-face classroom experience and can select options from multiple formats, courses, programs and institutions. Not only are learners given a variety of options and opportunities, learners are also now required to analyze these options and determine how they best meet their learning objectives, personal circumstances, opportunities and limitations. This dynamic, in and of itself, places much more decision making responsibility on the learner than in the more traditional face-to-face classroom model of education where choices are relatively limited to specific course and content selection, and limited scheduling options. With online learning options, learners now have more freedom and flexibility, not only to make decisions about selection, but they have more freedom and flexibility to accommodate the various demands and interests of their lives.

Recognizing the opportunities and challenges inherent in choice, it becomes increasingly clear that learning is no longer confined to specific place and time, rather it transcends these rigid constraints and allows for expanded autonomy and independence. It could be argued that this expanded autonomy and independence is more aligned with the intrinsic nature of learning as a transcendent process, yet it could also be argued that formal learning requires guidance and structure. This tension then requires individuals and institutions engaged in online learning to examine carefully the traditional dynamic of teaching and learning, as well as the roles of both the instructor and the learner in this process. Cannell (1999) submits that the Worldwide Web has facilitated this shift in educational perspective and concludes that, "contemporary educational practices stress the importance of meaning making and reflection on experience, concept formation and critical thinking and, in turn, signal a shift from behaviorist's notions of teachers as

dispensers of knowledge and students as passive recipients" (p.17). This then directs us to examine the process and components of the teaching and learning dynamic and how teaching and learning have been altered by expanded independence provided by online learning environments. The larger question is how best to maximize these changes to improve the overall experience afforded by online learning environments.

The problem this study addresses is how instructors can best maximize the online learning experience and provide the learner the necessary encouragement to take an active role in and more responsibility for the learning process.

## Purpose of the Study

The central purpose of this study is to describe instructor's observations of the following four aspects of undergraduate online learning: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence. The secondary purpose of this investigation is to identify specific characteristics of the online learning experience that may assist instructors, learners, and institutions in better understanding how to improve upon the overall teaching and learning experience of online formats.

This study uses a qualitative approach and is meant to address the complexity of learning online. It is meant to provide a forum for exploration of the possible ways in which instructors can best facilitate the online learning process and an attempt to expand our understanding of online learning. Most importantly it is meant to broaden our response to the way in which we facilitate and engage the learner in the creation of a meaningful online learning environment.

Because the interaction between learner and instructor is complex and dynamic, this study uses a holistic perspective and relies on inductive analysis. The study examines

the extent to which instructors in online environments consider the specific factors that impact the learners' learning experience, as well as explores ways in which the learner can be encouraged to become more engaged in the online learning process.

## Areas of Focus

This study examines instructors' views of four key areas of online learning as they specifically relate to the learner. These areas are learner self-direction, learner reflection, learner community, and learner persistence.

### Learner Self-Direction.

Learner self-direction is the extent to which the learner takes responsibility and initiative for planning, implementing and monitoring his or her own learning, with or without explicit guidance or direction from another (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979). All learners exhibit various levels of self-direction which tend to fall on the continuum of either a low or high ability to self-direct. Grow's (1991) linear model of Staged Self-Directed Learning (SSDL) argues that there are essentially 4 stages of self-directed learning on the continuum. The low self-directed learner requires a great deal of input and direction from the instructor, while the learner with high self-direction is able to work autonomously regardless of the amount of guidance received from the instructor. Garrison's (1997) model of self-direction includes self-management and argues that autonomy does not disregard the social aspects of learning, but recognizes the learner's ability to control the situation in a way that is beneficial to the learner. The learner uses the learning environment and the social interactions as a forum to explore, enhance, confirm or negate understanding. Garrison also includes motivation and self-monitoring

as aspects of self-direction in his model, arguing that the self-directed learner is conscious of him or herself as a learner and is conscious of their learning on a meta-cognitive level. Motivation is concerned with why the learner has initiated the learning activity and why he or she either continues with or disengages from the activity.

Given the nature of the format and the technology of online learning environments, a relatively high level of self-direction is desired. In the online learning environment, the learner is required to work autonomously without the benefit of the immediate interaction with the instructor or without the immediate interaction with other learners. The online learner is also required to manage their own educational behaviors and habits and align them with the autonomy of working in physical isolation.

Learner's who have high self-direction will rely on themselves to create strategies that will help them adjust to the learning environment. The learner with low self-direction will seek frequent clarification and guidance from either the instructor or other learners. This clarification and guidance may or may not be readily and immediately available in the online environment.

Learner Reflection

The ability of the learner to reflect on an experience and connect it with new information is the basis for transformational learning. Mezirow's (1991) construct of learning as transformation suggests that the learner is conscious of self and examines previous held beliefs and assumptions through reflection in order to arrive at a new conclusion. Kolb (1984) provides a model for experiential learning which suggests that once the learner has an experience, the learner reflects upon it, considers what can be

learned from the experience, and essentially experiments with new ways of engaging with an idea or activity. The learner is an active and engaged participant in the experience and learning is not a passive activity. Learning is a constant response and reflection of existing experiences and knowledge that creates a new dimension for experimentation and implementation of ideas in order to gain a stronger view of ones understanding of the world. Schon's (1983) view also recognizes the dynamic relationship with the learning activity and the cognitive engagement of reflection as essential to understanding. Schon dismisses technical rationality for a more complex view of learning. Schon suggests that the learner engages in a "conversation with the situation" by reflecting on his or her "initial appreciation" of the situation and the resulting accommodations the learner makes in reconciling previous understanding with the current experience (p.79).

In online learning environments, not only must the learner engage with and reflect on the content of the course and how he or she understands it, but also must engage in reflective practice on how they learn. Although more and more learners are enrolling in online courses, most have developed their personal strategies for learning in the traditional face-to-face environment. The online environment introduces an alternative delivery format that forces the learner to adapt to the new experience. This necessity to adapt to a new environment presents the learner and the instructor an opportunity for exploration of the meta-cognitive aspect of learning which can guide the learner to a stronger understanding of self and content, which in turn, is an exercise in transformation.

Learner Community

The exchange of beliefs and ideas with others optimizes the opportunity to compare and contrast individual beliefs with those of others. This synergy encourages the learner to potentially develop a new perspective. Exchanging and engaging in dialogue with others assists the learners in confirming, negating, or altering previously constructed knowledge. Habermas (1970) stresses the need for an environment of discourse which provides the learners with an environment that is open and free of judgmental behaviors, an environment where participants are free to identify uncertainties and engage in a dialogue which is supportive of alternative views. Online learning environments, because of physical separation, present challenges for creation of learning environments yet a learning community is necessary as a forum for discourse and exchange of ideas. Baxter Magolda (1992) argues similarly that this dialogue is essential to the development of beliefs and learner capacity. In addition to the benefits and necessity of engaging in dialogue and discourse in the learning process, the personal and social aspects of learning to an individuals sense of well being can not be ignored. Online learning environments provide flexibility and transcend the constraints of time and place, however, online learning environments can also lead to feelings of isolation for the learner. This isolation and lack of connection can lead to an unsatisfactory experience as well as lead to the complete withdrawal of the learner from the learning experience. (Kember, 1989).

Learner Persistence

Learner persistence is the learner's decision to continue or terminate involvement in the learning experience. Although there are no definitive answers as to why students depart from a learning experience, persistence and retention in distance education (Fjortoft, 1995; Kember, 1989; Sweet, 1986) and specifically online programming (Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2004; Woodley, 2004) emerges as a concern and has often been discussed in the literature. Tinto's (1987) seminal work on persistence suggests that factors such as work and family obligations often lead to attrition. As noted, learners who select online learning environments generally do so based on the need for flexibility and convenience. These reasons for selection can be viewed as an indication of the multiple demands placed on the learner and the need to seek ways to accommodate both time and resource constraints. Although the learner may recognize the control they have regarding when they engage in the learning activity, the learner may or may not be fully conscious of the additional demands the online course may place on their time.

In order to be successful in the online environment the learner must be willing and able to balance not only the multiple demands and expectations of the actual learning experience but also those outside of the formal setting. Although the instructor is not expected to diminish the demands of the course simply because of the stresses the learner may experience, there is a role for instructors to recognize these multiple demands and encourage the learner to develop strategies to address and manage these concerns. Ultimately, if the learner is too overwhelmed by multiple demands and stresses, the learner may fail to persist simply on the basis they lack effective strategies or systems of support to accommodate the experience.

In recent years, much has been done by way of studying pedagogy and instructional design in online environments. Although there has been a shift in focus which has begun to emphasize the learner's role in the process of learning online additional exploration is needed. Certainly, learners enter all learning experiences with a series of expectations, established behaviors and schema; however, individuals engaged in an online learning experience often bring a new set of dynamics and preconceptions to the experience. One such variable is the motivation or reason for selecting the online course. It has been well documented that learners select online courses primarily because of the convenience and flexibility. The learner is no longer confined to place or time which, for those with multiple responsibilities, is an essential motivation and benefit. As a result, the learner is given freedom and control over his or her own learning environment. Certainly, the benefits are clear when viewed through the learner's lens. However, along with these benefits, a level of responsibility, discipline, and self-direction is implied. These implied expectations may or may not be recognized by the learner, or quite possibly, even by the facilitator of the learning experience. Furthermore, attrition rates among learners enrolled in online courses is generally high when compared to face-to-face instruction. Although this study does not attempt to draw any correlation between learner self-direction, reflection, community, or persistence, it explores these various aspects of the online learning experience and examines relationships and impact on the online learning experience. The intent and relevance of this study is to expand and broaden our response to the way in which we engage the learner in the creation of and participation in a meaningful online learning experience.

This study examines the extent to which instructors in online environments consider the specific factors that impact the students' learning experience, as well as explores ways in which the learner can be encouraged to be more conscious of the learning process. The study investigates instructors' views of the following four areas of focus: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence.

## Area of Focus and Lines of Inquiry

This study uses three specific lines of inquiry to examine four broader areas of focus of undergraduate learning online. Each of the areas of focus and their lines of inquiry are presented below.

### Focus Area 1: Learner Self-Direction

The first area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner self-direction is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner self-direction. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner self-direction.

### Focus Area 2: Learner Reflection

The second area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner reflection is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen

effective strategies that encourage learner reflection. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner reflection.

Focus Area 3: Learner Community

The third area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner community is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner community. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner community.

Focus Area 4: Learner Persistence

The fourth area of focus is learner persistence. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner persistence is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner persistence. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner persistence.

## Definition of Terms

The following examples are the terms that are unique to understanding this study.

Asynchronous Learning Describes when the learner can participate in the learning activity at a time convenient for him/her. The learner is not required to participate in the learning activity at a specified and designated time.

Blackboard A computer software platform used in online course design. The Blackboard system provides the software necessary for the design of the online course and has several features which facilitate written communication between and among participants in the online learning experience.

Blog A publicly accessible online journal for an individual. Short for Web-log.

Community An environment where discourse is encouraged and learners are free to engage in dialogue which is supportive of alternative views.

Dial-up The process by which the Internet is accessed through the use of a telephone line.

Digital Storytelling A term used to describe story telling through photos, pictures, and other technology which can be transmitted through the Internet.

Distance Education A term used to describe the learning opportunities provided through various technologies that reach learners who are not physically present in a classroom. Various types of distance education technologies include, interactive television, satellite, and online.

Internet The global connection of computers.

Learner The learner is the participant in and the recipient of a learning activity. The term student is often used to describe this individual.

Mp3 audio file A digital audio file which can be compressed and transmitted over the Internet.

Netiquette Term used to describe the etiquette guidelines and rules necessary to maintain civility in discussions as well as guidelines for standard communication practices through the Internet. The term is short for Internet Etiquette.

Online Term used to describe how learners are connected via specific equipment, generally called a modem, which allows them to access the Internet.

Persistence Learner's decision to continue involvement in a learning experience rather than terminate the experience.

Self-direction The extent to which the learner takes responsibility and initiative for planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating his or her own learning with or without the explicit guidance or direction from another.

SKYPE A computer program which allows individuals to enter into two way interactive communication using either audio or audio/video signals to communicate.

Synchronous learning Term used to described a learning situation whereby all participants are engaged at a specified and designated time.

Reflection The ability of the learner to consider prior experience and connect it with new information. The learner is conscious of self and examines previously held beliefs and assumptions in order to arrive at new conclusions.

Web-based The same as World Wide Web. A system of connected servers that permit one to communicate with another, thus allowing access and connections to digital information.

World Wide Web A system of connected servers that permit one to communicate with another, thus allowing access and connections to digital information.

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## Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. First, this study is the description of individual experiences and cannot be generalized to the larger population. Secondly, the study participants were not randomly selected. The study participants were selected from a limited pool of individuals teaching an undergraduate online course during a specific time period at a specific institution. The participants were selected from the actual list of individuals teaching in the online format and their participation was based on a limited number of selection criteria. Third, the investigator of this study was employed by the

institution where the study was conducted. Individual biases of the investigator may have influenced the interview process as well as individual study participants. Finally, the investigator selected four aspects of teaching and learning which do not include the wide range of factors that impact and influence teaching and learning. By limiting the study to four aspects of teaching and learning, the study may overlook critical components and relationships that influence or impact the experience, therefore the study only provides examination of a limited number of variables.

## Assumptions

It is assumed that the views of the study participants are based on their actual online teaching experiences and are a selected snapshot of their experiences as viewed specifically from the following areas of focus: (1) Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence. It is also assumed that during the interview process the study participants were able to reflect on their own experiences and respond solely based on those individual experiences. And finally, it is assumed that answers to the interview questions reflected the study participants real experiences and perspectives.

# CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

## Introduction

Many institutions of higher education are engaging in distance education particularly in the form of Internet or online courses and programs. Over the past several years there have been numerous inquires related to the online delivery format and to the various aspects of online learning. Many studies have focused specifically on the technology itself and how it may hinder or enhance learning (Yu & Durrington, 2005; Ham, 2005; Joo, Bong & Choi, 2000; Lee & Witta, 2001) and have found that if the learner is without sufficient technical experience it can negatively impact the online learning and the overall experience. Other lines of inquiry have compared online verses traditional face-to-face environments (Clark & Jones, 2001; Russell, 1999; Ryan, 2002) and have found there is no significance difference between the two formats. In recent years there has been a noticeable shift from studying the technical and operational aspects of teaching and learning online to the social aspects of the experience and how this impacts overall learning outcomes and student success. This literature review focuses on four key areas that provide a framework for this study: Self-Directed Learning; Role of the Instructor; Social Integration and Knowledge Building; and Persistence. The intent of this review is to provide an overview of the literature as it relates to these four areas.

## Self-Directed Learning

Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung (2004) explored learner role adjustment in online environments and, although the primary purpose of their study was to validate their instrumentation, the authors conclusions suggest that face-to-face learning environments are generally perceived by the learner as oriented to the social and teaching

presence of the experience, while online learning encourages the cognitive dimension of the learning experience. This suggests that online learning may be perceived as "requiring greater individual responsibility" (p.70) from the learner.

Boyer (2004) explored this concept in her attempt to determine how online learning design can be used to assist learners in developing stronger self-directed learning strategies. Boyer argues that the desire and need to provide clarity for learners has led to a rigid and technocratic approach to teaching and learning online and suggests online environments often encourage "compliant learners", a term used by Ponticell and Zapeda (2004). Boyer believes that learning in the online environment requires learners be "granted the responsibilities for planning, searching, finding and producing learning objectives, while instructors provide scaffolds, resources, feedback and expertise that is essential to connect system components" (p.125).

Boyer studied 112 adult learners ages 25-65 enrolled in a variety of university professional programs and utilized a model based on three concepts: input, process and output. Input was characterized as the learners' previous experiences and knowledge; process, the meta-cognitive aspect of learning, and output, the overall learning gain or learning product. The researcher utilized a pre- and post-self-diagnostic test as the intervention. Learners were asked to rate their level of knowledge of the content area prior to the course. The learners then developed a learning contract both as an individual learner and as a member of the group. At the end of the course, learners were required to post a final reflection of the experiences, and finally the learner completed a post-test rating their level of knowledge after having completed the course.

Although the learners may have been influenced to rate their increase in knowledge high during the post-test, the learner's self-assessed growth between the pre-test and the post-test were significant and Boyer concludes that the scaffolds provided by the learning intervention, the learning contract, provides a meaningful opportunity for the learner to take responsibility in the learning experience which she concludes, leads to becoming a stronger self-regulated learner. Although instructors play a critical role in online learning by way of facilitation and feedback, the learner must also become involved in guiding the direction of the learning experience.

Richardson and Newby (2006), used the Study Process Questionnaire (SPQ) designed by Biggs (1987) to determine the extent of cognitive engagement of students in online learning environments. The authors were most interested in which motivations and strategies learners were utilizing as defined by Biggs' design – Surface, Achieving and Deep. The authors conclude that learners who have had more experience with online environments are more likely to use Deep Strategies, strategies which assist the learner in discovering meaning by relating knowledge and making connections. It is suggested that as learners become more familiar with the online environments they "appear to be more self-regulatory in their strategies" (p.32).

Sharma and Hannafin (2002) suggest that scaffolding is one way of increasing student self-regulated learning and critical thinking ability. Scaffolding, according to the authors, is the process by which the instructor supports the increasing development of the learner's knowledge base by building upon existing skills and encouraging the learner to expand beyond that knowledge to develop a new perspective or set of skills. Eventually, the moderator of the learning experience moves from expert and purveyor of the

information to a facilitating role. The intent is to assist the learner in developing higher order thinking skills through use of prompts or questions that lead to the learner's development of meta-cognitive skills and strategies. The researchers addressed how the learner perceives the use of scaffolding, and what processes impact the development of critical thinking skills. The participants of Sharma and Hannafin's study initially perceived the process, which was primarily a series of questions and examples, as a directive process developed by the instructor. However, over time most students "began to perceive scaffolding as a guide to help them achieve their own special needs"(p.4). The authors found five influencing elements in the development of critical thinking, these included reflection, feedback, problem context, perception of self as learner, and prior knowledge.

Dabbagh (2003) discusses a model of shared responsibility of both instructor and learners in the online environment through scaffolding. Learners can assist the instructors in determining the type of guidance and type of scaffolding the individual learner needs and argues that the approach or technique of scaffolding encourages the learners to become self-directed by being included in the learning process. The instructor then becomes the facilitator and co-creator of an environment where collaboration, self reflection, and awareness of the learning process are encouraged. Although this shift from the instructor as central focus of the learning environment to the student as the central focus, is not a new concept (Friere,1970; Knowles, 1975) it continues to be stressed as a necessity within the online learning environment (Dabbagh, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2001; Smith, 2005).

## Role of Instructor

The current view of the instructor's role in the learning process has shifted from instructor as the authoritative expert to faculty as facilitators of learning. With this, instructors are not only guiding the learning through the factual content but assisting the learner in cognitive development. The instructor also assists the learner in developing the skills of self-direction and independence. This enhances the role of the instructor and suggests the need for instructors to continually assess their role and the necessity to adapt a learner-centered approach.

Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) recognized the importance of interaction of the learner with the content of the course as well as with the instructor and other students. They submit that the role of the instructor is "powerful in triggering discussion and facilitating high levels of thinking and knowledge construction" (p.137). They compared four treatment groups, each group of online learners was instructed differently. Two groups received little interaction with the instructor and were directed to complete tasks such as analyze readings and respond to text while working in small groups. The remaining two groups received a great deal of input by the instructor and were asked to participate in discussions of material. One group was asked to participate on a voluntary basis and students moderated the discussions, while the other group was heavily guided by the instructor. The results indicated that the group who received the heaviest influence by the instructor engaged in higher –order learning. This study suggests that "the quality of interaction (i.e., critical discourse) must be a specific design goal and interaction facilitated and directed in a sustained manner if deep approaches to learning

are to be achieved" (p.141), and suggests that the instructor must be available to facilitate and guide the discourse in order to achieve cognitive involvement from the learners.

This then suggests that instructors must be willing and prepared to guide learners through the process of cognitive presence. Richardson and Newby (2006) suggest that when developing the course, instructors "need to take into account the characteristics of a population" (p.34) with respect to the learners unique background which includes program area, age, and prior learning. From their view the instructor must develop interventions that "would allow students to be exposed to additional strategies"(p.34). In order to develop these strategies and interventions training and professional development opportunities exploring these avenues have been recommended. (Galusha, 1998; Lee & Busch, 2005).

## Social Integration and Knowledge Building

There is no argument as to the importance of social integration and interaction as a critical component to learning, yet there are varying perspectives of what constitutes social integration and the level to which it impacts cognitive development in online learning environments.

Simpson and Du (2004) conducted a correlational study of 169 masters level learners to determine the relationship between learning styles, participation and learner self-reported enjoyment of the online class. The researchers found that learning styles significantly impacted the learner's self-reported enjoyment of the course, however, learning styles did not significantly impact learner participation. The overall premise of the study was based on the level of enjoyment as an indicator of success in the online

environment and recorded participation as the total number of posts, accessed pages on the site, and the total postings read by the learners. The researchers themselves acknowledge that evaluating learners based on this measure is extremely weak and that the quality of the posts would be a much better indicator of learning outcomes. Chung, Chung, and Severance (1999) had also dismissed the idea that simply quantitatively measuring the number of times a learner comments or accesses the information and submit that the frequency of interaction alone is not sufficient for knowledge integration and that the type of interaction is what is most relevant.

Ritchi and Hoffman's (1997) assessment of online learners concluded that many students "simply tend to post their ideas or read others' ideas without engaging in deep thinking processes such as analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing ideas and argue that learners generally browse "superficially" but don't engage in thoughtful and active learning. Dreyfus (2001) in his discussion of learning on the Internet, argues that social interaction is necessary for the learning experience to be successful and suggests that a level of risk taking, by way of opinion and mastery of the content, must be present in order for the learner to advance or be transformed. Dreyfus submits that "if each student is at home in front of his or her terminal, there is no place for such risky involvement"(p.39), hence leaving the learner no more than a consumer of content rather than an analytical and critical thinker. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005), maintain that "high levels of interaction may be reflective of group cohesion, but it does not directly create cognitive development or facilitate meaningful learning and understanding" (p. 135).

It is without question that simply posting and scanning information, nor interaction alone, will develop the cognitive transformation required of critical and analytical thinkers, however it can not be assumed that online environments do not and can not encourage deeper cognitive development of the learner. In a study of 64 students enrolled in a online baccalaureate Nursing program, Theile (2003) found that these online learners scored higher in factual learning in comparison to 42 learners enrolled in the face-to-face format of the course. Most interesting, however, is the self-reported comments of learning made by the online learners. Theile questioned the learners on how they had changed as learners through their involvement in the online asynchronous format and found that the comments made by 58 (91%) of the learners identified that they had become more independent in their learning and "several students indicted their way of thinking about learning changed" (p.365). The author found four themes that emerged from the learners' comments regarding what they felt had impacted their perceived changes as learners:

- Format itself increased participation;
- Convenience and flexibility;
- Prompt feedback;
- Regular use and increased ability to communicate.

## Persistence

Although persistence in online courses is difficult to track there is a general consensus that attrition in online learning tends to be higher than that of face-to-face traditionally formatted courses. Tinto's (1987) Longitudinal –Process Model of Drop-Out

has often been used as a foundation for the discussion of persistence in higher education. Although Tinto's work was not aimed at the distance education learner, the model has found application and appeal among researchers and scholars of distance education (Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Sweet, 1986; and Woodley, 2004). The model emphasizes the learner's social integration with the institution, with the faculty, and with other learners as critical components of persistence. Kember (1989) expanded Tinto's model submitting that social integration as presented in the model does not fully address all types of integration required of the distance education learner. Kember suggests that social integration in a distance education environment must take into consideration how the learner integrates and manages the demands of home, social, and work environments. Kember found that distance education learners "who receive support and encouragement from family, friends, and employers which enables them to cope with study in the home find it easier to come to terms with their academic demands" (p. 11). On the contrary, those who do not receive support and encouragement from these sources had much more difficulty in accommodating the demands of academic pursuits. This lack of support led to lower GPA and a much stronger likelihood of departure.

Sweet (1986) recognized that most learners enrolled in distance education courses had a variety of family and job related responsibilities that prevented them from enrolling in a traditional face-to-face course. From Sweet's view, social integration with instructors and other learners "significantly influenced student commitment and persistence" (p.201). Furthermore, Fjortoft (1995) found that learners who perceived the course of study as enhancing work performance and as being directly related to "specific career related factors" (p.6) were much more likely to persist than those learners who did

not perceive the course of study as related to their employment and professional responsibilities.

In addition there have been a number of studies exploring the relationship between learning styles and various dimensions of online learning, including persistence. In a study conducted by Terrell and Dringus' (2000) no correlation between student learning styles and attrition was found. However, the researchers did find that learners who were identified as *accommodators* as described in Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) had a much higher percentage of departure from the class than did learners who had been identified in other categories of the model. Learners who fall in the *accommodating* category tend to process information best if they are engaged in an immediate experience and are provided the opportunity to actively apply concepts to real situations. These learners generally enjoy working with others to engage and test their understanding.

It is apparent that multiple reasons for attrition exist and there is no one dominant reason for departure. Willging and Johnson (2004) sought to determine the reasons why learners departed from an online Master's program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Although the study only consisted of 30 learners and no definitive conclusions can be drawn, four categories for departure were identified:

- Personal reasons such as financial difficulties, lack of time, scheduling and family problems;
- Job related reasons such as lack of support from workplace;
- Program related reasons such as difficulty of assignments, lack of interaction with instructor and other students;

- Technology related reasons such as the de-personalized nature of the learning environment and lack of technical support and preparation.

Isolation and limited contact with instructors and others in the class have also been well documented as central challenges for learners in online environments and can impact completion rates and successful learning experiences (Cannell, 1999; Link & Scholtz, 2000; Ricketts, Wolfe, Norvelle, & Carpenter, 2002; and Smith, 2005). Brown (2001) and Richardson and Swan (2003) argue that community building can limit feelings of isolation and improves satisfaction, retention and learning. Woodley (2004) submits that while accepting that social integration is relevant, focusing on how to increase levels of integration is necessary.

In recent years there has been a noticeable shift from studying the technical and operational aspects of online learning to focus on the learning and the aspects of successful learners and design. This literature has provided the necessary background for understanding several of the components of learning and how they relate specifically to online environments.

# CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

Online environments are a relatively new context in which learning takes place. As a result, studies and observations have been made from a variety of aspects in an attempt to understand the experience. An area that has prompted inquiry is the high rate of attrition in online environments. Although there are no definitive conclusions as to why attrition is high, many have used variations and expansions of Tinto's (1987) model of the Longitudinal –Process Model of Drop-Out to better understand the phenomenon.

Secondly, some have questioned the quality of learning that takes place and have compared online learning to traditional face-to-face environments in order to better understand how the modality of online impacts learning. Many have found that there is no significant difference between the two environments. These studies have primarily used grade point averages as the measurement for the comparison. Although this, in and of itself, may be a significant interpretation of success, it does not necessarily provide any insights into the complexity of the learning process. Dewey (1938), Knowles (1970), Mezirow (1981), and Schon (1983) hold the view that experience and critical reflection are key aspects of learning and recognize that variables outside the formal setting should be considered as part of the entire learning experience.

Not all educators share the same view regarding the role of instructor and the role of the learner in the learning experience. Many behaviorists believe that course content is separate from the identity, personal context and experiences of the learner, and that the learner's behavior can be manipulated through activities and content. The constructivists view of learning, however, suggests that the creation of meaning is influenced by an

individual's reality and that experience is the foundation from which meaning can be derived and constructed. From this perspective, teaching and learning is a dialogue and exchange between facilitator and pupil and suggests that learning is reciprocal. The role of the instructor, therefore, is to facilitate and assist the learner in negotiating meaning. Furthermore, Habermas (1970) and Mezirow (1991) believe learning and transformation occurs when the individual has reflected on an experience and reconciled new information with prior information and constructs new meaning, which in essence enlarges the learner's view of and interaction with the world and prepares the learner for subsequent experiences. Schon (1983) submits that not only the learner but the instructor as well must also engage in the practice of reflection in order to create new meaning and understanding of the practice of teaching and learning. This paradigm of teaching and learning will be used as the philosophical framework for this investigation.

Finally, Garrison's (1997) model of Self-Directed Learning provides a framework in which the learner's role in the learning process is recognized. Using the constructivist's lens, Garrison argues, "motivation and responsibility are reciprocally related and both are facilitated by collaborative control of the educational transaction" (p.29).

The constructivist's perspective combined with the theoretical constructs of Tinto and Garrison imply an iterative and dynamic relationship between learner, instructor, content and context which will be explored in this study.

## Research Methodology

The process of learning is a complex human phenomenon that resists any one formula that would address needs and motivations of the learner, the content and context for learning, and the social and meta-cognitive dynamic of the learning experience. Because the interaction between learner and instructor is a complex and dynamic system that is impacted by individual characteristics and factors, this study used a holistic perspective and relied on inductive analysis.

In studying this phenomenon it is important to recognize its highly subjective nature. Certainly, there are aspects to teaching and learning that can be understood through a positivist perspective, yet the complexity of the phenomenon does not fall neatly into one theoretical construct. Teaching and learning is not static, it is dynamic. This very nature of teaching and learning encourages a broader holistic view of a very human experience and may vary from individual to individual and from situation to situation. This study does not attempt to draw any conclusions that can be generalized to a broader population. It does however, attempt to explore the nature of teaching and learning in one particular experience among a specific group of individuals. As a result, a qualitative approach is used and follows the canons and procedures of grounded theory (Creswell, 2003; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The process is emic in focus; is concerned with the perspective of individuals directly involved in the process or activity of learning online.

The study examined the extent to which instructors in online environments consider the specific factors that impact the students' learning experience, as well as explored ways in which the learner can be encouraged to be more conscious of the

learning process. The study investigated instructors' views of the following four areas of focus: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence.

Each of the areas of focus was guided by a series of inquiry questions which, in turn, provided the basis for probing questions which were used when gathering specific input from instructors. The inquiry was designed to determine the process of the phenomenon of online teaching and learning and to focus on how things happen rather than attempting to give a definitive explanation of why they happen (Maxwell, 1996).

## Area of Focus and Lines of Inquiry

This study used three specific lines of inquiry to examine four broader areas of focus of undergraduate learning online. Each of the areas of focus and their lines of inquiry are presented below.

### Focus Area 1: Learner Self-Direction

The first area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner self-direction is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner self-direction. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner self-direction.

Focus Area 2: Learner Reflection

The second area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner reflection is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner reflection. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner reflection.

Focus Area 3: Learner Community

The third area of focus is learner self-direction. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner community is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner community. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner community.

Focus Area 4: Learner Persistence

The fourth area of focus is learner persistence. Within this area of focus the first line of inquiry addresses how learner persistence is encouraged in online environments. The second line of inquiry addresses whether instructors have seen effective strategies that encourage learner persistence. The third line of inquiry addresses the barriers that inhibit learner persistence.

## Study Participants

The study participants were drawn from a regional state university located in Michigan. This institution had a predominantly undergraduate focus and enrolled approximately 22,000 students. Although the University has no formally recognized online programming, it does offer a relatively large number of online courses, particularly at the undergraduate level. Most students enrolled in Internet-based courses generally come from three counties, all within a 40 mile radius of the university's main campus. In 2006, there were 1,580 enrollments in Internet-based courses and the University has increased the number of sections offered from 18 sections offered in 2002 to 92 sections offered in 2006.

The study participants in this study were instructors of online undergraduate courses. The study participants were identified through the university's Office of Distance Education and the sample was drawn from a list of instructors who were either currently teaching an online course or had offered at least one online course within the past three semesters. There were 21 instructors on the list provided by the Office of Distance Education who had either taught online during the Spring/Summer semester of 2006 or the Fall semester of 2006. A contact letter was sent via email outlining the scope of the study and requesting participation and was followed by a personal contact from the researcher. The Michigan State University Human Subjects protocol was carefully followed and executed, as well as that of the study site. Because the researcher was an employee of the institution where the study was conducted, all respondents were informed of the researcher's role within the institution as well as how the data may be used as a baseline for future studies about distance education within the university.

Confidentiality of the study participants was assured. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with 11 study participants.

Eleven undergraduate instructors were interviewed. The interviews were primarily conducted in the office of the instructor, in a conference room on the campus of the university, and on one occasion, off the university premises in a public gathering place.

Of the 11 participants, seven of the participants were female and four were male. They ranged in age from approximately 30 to 65 years of age. Most had been teaching at the university level for over five years and had taught multiple sections of online courses. They varied in professional status from adjunct instructor to associate professor. The instructors also represented several disciplines including Education, Writing, Criminal Justice, Liberal Studies and Nursing. Among the participants, six lived within the immediate vicinity of the university, traveling less than 20 miles to the main campus, while five lived 50 or more miles outside the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the university.

The following is a short profile of each participant. All information is accurate; however the age of the participants is only estimation. No information other than their names has been changed. Names were changed in order to honor the confidentiality of the participants.

Adam Adam had taught at the university for approximately six years and had taught five undergraduate courses online. His expertise is technology and has taught several introductory course on technology in education. He selected to teach online classes primarily because he enjoys technology and believes future teachers must be prepared in

the uses of technology. Adam is 30-35 years of age. He is married and has two young children. He finds that teaching online has created flexibility and afforded him more time with his family. Adam lives in the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the institution.

Beth Beth has been teaching for approximately 14 years and has taught five courses on line. The course she taught online is a course on diversity. She was initially asked to teach the course online to accommodate a number of students who were taking classes at one of the university's satellite campuses. Beth is 50-55 years of age. Beth lives outside the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the institution and commutes more than 50 miles each way.

Connie Connie has been teaching for a number of years. She has taught at the community college and at the university level. Her area of expertise is writing. She originally taught online to accommodate students at the University satellite campuses but also taught online in order to fulfill her teaching load. Connie is single and is 50-55 years of age. Connie lives outside the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the institution. Her main office is housed at a university satellite campus which is approximately 230 miles from the main campus.

Denise Denise has been teaching for a number of years both at the community college level and at the university level. Her area of expertise is educational psychology. She has taught both undergraduate and graduate courses. Denise chose to teach online because of the flexibility it affords her. Denise is 45-55 years of age. She lives outside

the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the institution and commutes more than 100 miles each way.

Edward Edward has taught at the university for a number of years and his expertise is educational technology and teaches the introductory undergraduate course in technology online. Edward teaches online because the majority of Introduction to Technology courses offered at the undergraduate level are offered online. He is 50-55 years of age. Edward lives within the immediate vicinity of the main campus.

Frank Frank has taught for a number of years and has taught only one course online. He has taught at the university for approximately two years and spends his summers abroad. He teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses and has taught one online at the undergraduate level. Frank chose to teach online primarily during the summer because he is able to spend the entire summer abroad while continuing to teach. He is 55-60 years of age. He lives in the immediate vicinity of the main campus and in the summer lives abroad.

Gloria Gloria has been teaching at the institution for over 20 years. She has taught both undergraduate and graduate courses. She has taught using a variety of technologies to include satellite and interactive television formats. She also advises incoming students. She chose to teach online because of the program's outreach efforts to non-traditional students. Gloria is 55-60 years of age and lives within the immediate vicinity of the main campus of the institution.

Howard Howard has been teaching undergraduate writing courses for over 30 years and has taught online each semester for the past six years. The course he teaches online is required of all university students. The course was offered online originally to provide options to students. The writing course he teaches is offered primarily online, there are few face-to- face sections. Howard enjoys teaching online due in part because he conducts much of his business transactions online and enjoys the flexibility of the format. He is 55-60 years old and lives within the immediate vicinity of the university's main campus.

Irene Irene had taught in several disciplines to include liberal studies, literature and writing. She has taught two online sections of an undergraduate writing class. This course is a required course for all university students. She originally was asked and agreed to teach an online section of the required writing class very late in the semester. Following that she agreed to teach it a second time. Irene originally taught as a high school English teacher. She is approximately 30 years old, is married and has two young daughters. Irene lives within the immediate vicinity of the university's main campus.

Joyce Joyce has taught several times at the institution and previously was a tenured faculty member at one of the large public institutions in Michigan. She has taught five sections of online courses including at her previous institution. At the undergraduate level, she has taught diversity in education. Joyce chose to teach online because she is located well outside the immediate vicinity of the university, has her own private

company and still wants to remain connected to the university environment. She is approximately 50 years old. She is married and lives approximately 230 miles from the university's main campus.

Karen Karen has been teaching online for many years and has taught instructional design. She has taught both graduate and undergraduate students and her expertise is educational technology in the public school system. Karen has recently joined the staff at the institution and has taught two sections face-to-face and two sections of an online undergraduate technology course. She is approximately 50 years old and lives outside the immediate vicinity of the university's main campus.

## Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed to provide the interviewer and the study participant an opportunity to discuss in-depth the various facets of each of the key areas of inquiry to include: Learner Self-direction; Learner Reflection; Learner Community; and Learner Persistence. Operational definitions of each of the key areas were outlined in order to maintain the continuity between the interviewer and the study participants. The interview guide not only provided the questions necessary to reveal subtleties of the teaching and learning dynamic but also allowed for a semi-formal approach to the interview. This allowed the interview to follow a natural communication and conversational style and tone. The complete interview guide is found in Appendix A.

## Procedures for Data Collection

Michigan State University Human Subjects protocol was carefully followed and executed as well as that of the university where the study was conducted. The investigator sent out an electronic post, written by the investigator (Appendix B), explaining the purpose and intention of the proposed study including an invitation to participate to those instructors currently teaching an online undergraduate course or who had taught an online course within the past three semesters. The post was followed up with a personal phone call from the investigator.

Those agreeing to participate were sent an electronic version of the Participant Consent Form (Appendix C) by the investigator for signature. The Participant Consent Form insured the participant that although his/her comments would be used in the study, individual identities would be kept confidential. The investigator provided a self-addressed stamped envelope to be returned with the signed consent form to the investigator via the U.S. Postal Service. Copies of the signed form were provided to the study participants upon request. Those who agreed to participate and signed the Participant Consent Form were contacted by the investigator via electronic post or phone and a day and time for the interview was arranged.

One week before the interview was conducted a post was sent electronically to the participant reminding him/her of the purpose of the study as well as the time, date, and location. The investigator also provided the study participants with contact information in the event any unforeseen circumstances were present and personal scheduling conflicts arose. Several interviews were postponed or rescheduled but no participant, after having agreed to participate in the study, later declined to participate and withdrew. Before

conducting the interview, the investigator asked permission of the study participants to audio record the interviews in order to accurately capture the interview data. All study participants agreed to be recorded. It was also made clear that the audio recordings and the individual transcripts of the interviews would be destroyed after completion of the investigation. Before each interview, all study participants were given a review of the purpose of the study and of the interview and asked whether they had any questions or concerns. They were once again assured of the confidentiality of their identify. If there were questions or concerns, they were addressed at that time. No study participant expressed any concerns that were left unresolved.

Semi- structured and in-depth interviews were conducted in- person. Interviews were audio recorded and a transcribed hard copy was filed for review and analysis. This aided the investigator in capturing accurate data. The Interviewer Guide was structured in a manner that allowed for comments and notes to be added during the interview that did not hinder the flow of the conversation.

The interviewer made every attempt to create a relaxed and casual environment in which to conduct the interview. All interviews were conducted at a location chosen by the study participant and all but three were conducted in the study participants' office. The intent was to create an environment that allowed the interaction between the participant and investigator that was conversational in style and facilitated flexibility. Notes were taken during the interviews for added clarifications and observations made during the interview to include facial expressions and gestures. This aided in clarifying any ambiguities or subtleties not evident in the audiotape. Immediately following each interview, the notes and initial observations were expanded and emerging themes were

noted for later use when constructing the coding table and rubric for analysis. Following the "formal" outlined interview, participants were asked whether they had any additional comments or observations they would like to add, and upon conclusion of the interview, and were asked permission to be contacted again should there be a need for any clarification or follow up. All participants agreed to further contact if required. The participant was thanked for his/her participation and the interview was concluded.

A formal thank you for participation in the study (Appendix D) was sent to the participant either the same day as the interview or no later than one week after the interview was conducted. A postscript was added to the thank you note reminding those who had agreed to a possible follow up that they may be contacted again in the future.

## Treating, Coding and Analyzing Data

Qualitative data analysis requires thorough review of the data gathered and requires careful attention to themes and patterns. The recorded interviews were carefully transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was read and re-read numerous times paying careful attention to emerging themes and patterns. Codes were developed based on the emerging themes. This was an iterative process where codes were added, combined, revised and refined as data were read, reviewed and reflected. From this a coding table was constructed and a rubric developed for interpreting the data. The coding table was constructed with several factors in mind: it was important to provide a one word or short phrase description of the theme or concept that was emerging; a tag was assigned with a specific operational definition for the code; a rule for use of the tag was created to further specify the meaning of the code and when it is used; and finally an example of a situation

identifying when the code was applied and when the code was not applied. The additional clarification was to avoid any potential miscoding of the intent and description of the code.

A matrix was also created after all data were coded. The matrix provided a list of the codes on the *x*-axis while specifically identifying the direct quotes or paraphrased comments on the *y*-axis. This was a large compilation of the data and provided a means to view the overlaps and redundancies that existed, as well as provided an opportunity to compare and contrast responses. The matrix provided a means to further organize the data while providing additional opportunity for careful scrutiny and reflection of the data.

## Timeline

The interviews were conducted over a period of three months from September until November of 2006. Transcription and initial analysis of the data was also conducted during this time frame. Once the interviews and transcripts were completed a careful analysis was conducted over the months of December, January, and February of 2006-07. The data and analysis of the data are presented in Chapter IV.

# CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS

## Introduction

The central purpose of this study was to describe instructor's observations of the following four aspects of online learning: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence. The secondary purpose of this investigation was to identify specific characteristics of the online learning experience that may assist instructors, learners, and institutions in better understanding how to improve upon the overall teaching and learning experience of online formats. This chapter presents the findings from 11 in-depth undergraduate instructor interviews which were conducted over a three month period. The instructors who were selected to be interviewed were either teaching an undergraduate online course during the Fall semester of 2006 or had taught a course during the previous semester of Summer 2006. Instructors came from a variety of disciplines including nursing, criminal justice, education, and the humanities. The site for the investigation was a comprehensive university located in Michigan's Lower Peninsula. The University has approximately 23,000 students with approximately 19,000 undergraduate students enrolled in the Fall of 2006.

The study investigated instructor observations of four areas specifically related to teaching and learning online. The in-depth interviews focused on instructor views of learner self-direction, learner reflection, learner community, and learner persistence. Within each focus area, three lines of inquiry were explored. Instructors were asked to identify how they encouraged the learner, whether they had seen effective strategies that encouraged the learner, and finally participants were asked to identify the barriers that

inhibited the learner. This process was applied for each of the four areas of focus: learner self-direction; learner reflection; learner community; and learner persistence.

The organization of Chapter IV describes the participant views of the four aspects of learning online identified in this study (1) Learner Self-Direction, (2) Learner Reflection, (3) Learner Community and (4) Learner Persistence. Within each area, the findings are reported, described, and emergent themes derived.

## Instructor Views of Learner Self- Direction

Learner self-direction is the extent to which the learner takes responsibility and initiative for planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating his or her own learning, with or without explicit guidance or direction from another (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979). In online learning environments learners often work alone and independently. The learning environment is asynchronous, permitting each learner to participate in the class at a time they find most convenient. Given these characteristics, instructors were asked to describe their observations of learner self-direction and how they viewed the role of self-direction in online learning. Do they encourage learner self -direction and if so, how? Have they seen effective techniques or strategies for self-directed learning and what, if any, are the barriers that inhibited learner self-direction?

When asked about the importance of self-direction in online learning, the study participants were very definite in their views. In addition to viewing self-direction as a pre-requisite to success in online learning, Beth identified learner commitment as a necessary factor for online learning.

"I just think it's a must. Students can't succeed in online courses, I don't think, if they aren't really committed." (Beth)

She went on to say:

> "I think it's [online learning] akin to doing independent study. The student has to be disciplined to do things on his or her own without consistent guidance." (Beth)

Other study participants were equally clear in their view of the need for learner self-direction.

> "It's very important. You've got to be focused." (Frank)

> "I think it's absolutely critical." (Gloria)

> "Oh, it's immense. Self-direction is what makes you check it [online course site] a couple of times a week rather than just once a week or once every two weeks and hope that you're ok on assignments." (Karen)

> "I think a student needs a high level of self-direction. This being about the 5th time I've done this. Without exception my grades will be bimodal. I will have students who are highly self-directed. They'll do the work, they'll go above and beyond and they will get A's. Some might earn B's. There will be students who will either drop out or be in the D or F category because they just can't direct themselves to do it." (Joyce)

Irene compared the need for self-direction in an online environment with the need for self-direction in a face-to-face environment.

> "I find that my online students have to have a little bit more self-direction than my students in class because they don't have me to ask questions of all the time. I'm not constantly reinforcing what I'm expecting out of their papers." (Irene)

Encouragement of Learner Self-Direction

Study participants identified a variety of methods used to encourage self-direction in online learning. A total of 15 different methods were identified as being used to encourage learner self-direction. Table 1 presents the methods identified by each of the study participants.

Table 1
Methods for Encouraging Self-Direction

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Post expectations | X | X | X | | | X | X | | | | |
| Post syllabus | X | X | X | | | X | X | X | X | | |
| Pre-class letter | | X | | | | X | | | | | |
| Online orientation | | | | | | X | | | | | |
| Ask student expectations | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Face to Face meeting | X | X | X | | | | | | | X | |
| Pod casts/stream casts | | | | | X | | | | | | |
| Audio tape | | | | | | X | | | | | |
| Study guides/study tips | | | | | | X | | | | | |
| Advising | | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Calendar/Timelines | | | X | | | X | X | X | X | | |
| Email reminders | X | X | | | | | | | X | | |
| Consultant/Assistant | | | | | | | | | X | | |
| Assignements | | | X | X | | | | | | | |
| Grades/points | X | | | | | | | | | X | X |

Three participants identified one learning method they used to encourage self-directed learning while many of the study participants identified more than one method. The most common method used by the study participants to encourage self-direction was to post the syllabus and to provide a detailed explanation of expectations to the online learners at the onset of the course. Beth and Adam stressed the importance of posting the information immediately.

> "They have my syllabus right away; I usually post it online along with all the assignments." (Beth)

> "I write up snippets of what my expectations are so the very first week of class I talk about what those expectations are, and then I post them to the online class." ( Adam)

> "I give them lots of explanation in the syllabus and again in the orientation. The orientation is a long discussion of what I'm doing and why I'm doing it." (Connie)

Adam also gives additional information to students by providing a link to expectations that students can access anytime during the semester.

> "I have a website that I make and one of the big links on the website is expectations with regard to class discussions and expectations with regard to labs." (Adam)

Beth compared the online course with that of a face-to face course, stressing the need for students to be more independent in the online learning environment.

> "I make it very clear to them [the students] that the expectations for online learning are definitely comparable to an in class environment but that they [the students] are more independent. In order to succeed they have to take responsibility for that independence and work more independently toward the goal." (Beth)

Similarly, Gloria also explicitly reminded students that they must be self-directed in the online class if they intend to succeed. She also encouraged the learner to evaluate whether an online format was the best format choice for their learning inclination.

> "I think that one thing you have to do with students is tell them what is going to occur and tell them that unless they are self-directed, maybe taking an online course is just not the way for them to go." (Gloria)

Both Beth and Frank contacted the learners shortly before the class began to welcome them and provide them with an overview of expectations of the course.

> "I send all my online students a 'pre-class' letter." (Beth)

> "First thing they've got is a welcome letter. You tell them what you're going to do, how you're going to do it." (Frank)

Frank also required his students to participate in an online orientation which reviewed the technical components of online learning.

> "They've got to do the orientation [online]. I require them to do it." (Frank)

Beth specifically asked students their expectations of the course and what they had hoped to accomplish as a way to encourage self-direction.

> "I have 4-5 questions that I give to them online about what their expectations are of the course, what they hope to learn." (Beth)

A number of instructors met face-to-face with students, or attempted to meet face-to-face, as part of an orientation to the online environment and specifically to review the syllabus and expectations of the course.

> "The very first meeting is face-to-face." (Adam)

> "I bring it [syllabus] with me to my first meeting with the students." (Beth)

> "I've had problems with the orientation session [held face-to-face]. I make it mandatory and they still don't come." (Connie)

Both Frank and Edward used other forms of technology to outline requirements and course information.

> "I made an audio file for them, which is an mp3 audio file that they can download, and it's welcome and explains to them what they've actually read. I'm giving them all the stuff they may require." (Frank)

> "I tried some things that I thought would help. For example, I started doing podcasts and streamcasts so that students could have access to the lectures that I typically do [in face-to-face]." (Edward)

Frank also provided specific links and documents encouraging learning strategies while Gloria explicitly outlined the need for self-direction in an online learning environment during advising sessions with potential online learners.

> "There's a study guide and in this folder are a number of documents

> that relate to study strategies. There's note taking guides, study strategies, preparing to study, and preparing yourself to succeed." (Frank)

> "I'm also an advisor for students and I talk to them about taking an online format versus an onsite format. I tell them they really have to keep on schedule, keep up with the calendar, and keep up to date with all of the assignments because if they get behind, they're lost." (Gloria)

Similar to Gloria, many of the instructors also commented on the need to provide the learners with specific timelines, due dates, and deadlines. In some cases, the study participants provided a detailed calendar and a suggested timeframe for initiation and completion of tasks. In this way, the learners were explicitly directed in how to manage their time when involved in an online class.

> "Everything is on a deadline." (Connie)

> "I do it with due dates. I set up a very detailed calendar at the beginning of each of the courses. I do a calendar where I say Unit 1 will start on this date and will end 5 days later." (Gloria)

> "I always have everything posted and every Friday they turn something in and they have to have something posted on blackboard." (Irene)

> "There's a lot of work. It's all in the syllabus; suggested time frame for completion of course readings and submission of required tasks. They've got it in the syllabus. I tell them to print it out and pin it on the fridge. This is important." (Frank)

> "I long ago gave up the proceed-at-your-own- pace type of class for this class. They [the students] have to do it by a certain time." (Howard)

In addition to providing the syllabus online, explicitly outlining expectations, and providing detailed timelines, Adam, Beth, and Irene often found it important and necessary to periodically remind the learners of due dates and assignments.

> "I will email students and say what you're doing so far is not quite up to par." (Adam)

> "Typically the first time a student misses an assignment I'll email them and tell them I didn't get something this week, and ask them to give it to me get it to

me right away, ASAP." (Adam)

"I'm reminding them on the discussion board all the time of things that are due. If I notice that some of the students are not keeping pace I remind them that that's a must to succeed in this online course." (Beth)

"When I see that they aren't doing that [posting], I kind of encourage them. I usually send specific emails, just individually to them to remind them, then I say this is the last time I'm going to remind you, it's up to you to keep up to date with this." (Irene)

"Sometimes they don't fully appreciate what I've spelled out as far as my expectations so they need more coaxing." (Beth)

No instructor, other than Irene, was assisted by an "in-class" consultant. In Irene's case, the consultant was a writing consultant who was able to work individually with students twice per week.

"I have an online writing consultant who helps them and she helps every Wednesday and Thursday. She's got a couple of hours that she can go on and talk to them." (Irene)

Several instructors believed that self-direction could be encouraged through the class assignments.

"I think that my assignments do that. I think you have to structure it accordingly." (Connie)

"Students have to be responsible and some of this is just the way the assignments are set up force them to be [self-directed]." (Connie)

"I did some work with critical incident reflection. I just felt they weren't being introspective enough. They were going through the hoops for me, but we weren't touching their soul where they live." (Denise)

Several instructors felt that one way to encourage self-direction among learners was to provide a direct relationship to the grade or points received on assignments.

"When I do an online discussion, we'll open the discussion on Monday morning at 10:00. We'll close on Sunday night at 10:00. You have to have done the reading by that point, you have to contribute during that week. If you miss that opportunity you lose those points." (Joyce)

"I'll let students know what the parameters are so, if the second week of class somebody is still falling behind, I'll let them know again but after that point they'll get lower points." (Adam)

"They're out there for grades. I guess the only way you can encourage self-direction is if the grade isn't reflective of what the student wants." (Karen)

Similarly to Karen, Howard believed that students were self-directed based on outside motivations particularly as they related to personal objectives, in one particular case, employment.

"They [the student] may have graduated except for this course. In fact right now I have one student who is waiting on a job, had the job offer, but can't take the job without this course. The student completed everything else, had the interview, got the job except for this, so he's well self-directed." (Howard)

Several study participants felt they had little control over encouraging learner self-direction.

"I think if there is a way I haven't really figured out what it is, but I think it's probably an institutional problem. I think it is when students are going to use this approach in their own learning that they need to perhaps go through some kind of a quick seminar for an afternoon and talk about the specific steps it takes to be an independent learner." (Joyce)

"I don't know if I think I have the ability to encourage. I think I have the ability to facilitate the opportunity for students to become self-directed and be involved within their own learning. I'm not so sure that I can teach that, I can promote it. I can facilitate the opportunity." (Denise)

"I'm not sure if there is anything I could do more that could get them to invest more." (Denise)

"I don't know how to, I don't know what I do to help with their being self-directed. I put guideposts out there. So that's not helping them be self-directed because they still have to meet those external guideposts, so I don't know." (Karen)

Effective Techniques for Self-Directed Learning

Of the 11 participants interviewed, no study participant indicated that he or she had seen any other instructors apply any effective techniques or strategies for self-directed learning.

> Interviewer: Have you participated in any techniques or seen other faculty or instructors use similar or different techniques to encourage self-directed learning?
>
> "Oh, no, I have not." (Adam)
>
> "No" (Beth)
>
> "I haven't seen. When you do an online class I've just adapted what I do to the online format, so I don't know how other people do it necessarily." (Connie)
>
> "We've [instructors] discussed it. I guess the way I design my course compared to the others [instructors] just didn't lend itself to the online." (Edward)
>
> "No, not at all."(Frank)
>
> "Well, not really. I haven't really talked to anyone." (Gloria)

Beth indicated she had worked with an instructional designer experienced in online design to determine the most effective strategies.

> "When I was asked to develop this course I got in touch with the instructional designer. She's terrific and she's super knowledgeable. She coached me. She has a lot and has had a lot of experience before we had met with teaching online and she shared a lot of her personal experiences and things that worked for her and things that maybe didn't." (Beth)

When asked whether they had seen students use effective self-direction strategies, several instructors commented on strategies they've seen students use which were generally either through question and answer with instructor and/or other students, or through some type of calendar or visual reminder.

> "Class questions and announcements. Last semester a student posted a question that said 'I'm having trouble with this particular assignment, I don't know how to get started.' Other students would then respond and say 'here's a strategy I used.'

So in that sense I can see that other students had kind of self-starting strategies." (Adam)
"Most of the time they [questions] are asked to me other students will jump in before I log in and respond to the student. So they help one another." (Adam)

"They've [students] shared things they've done. Whether it's keeping their palm pilot or keeping a calendar. Some of them post their calendars on the refrigerator for the whole family to see so that they [the family] know that mom or dad at this point needs to be doing such and such or they have a big paper due or whatever." (Gloria)

"They're similar to strategies I've seen in in-person classrooms, setting up a calendar, a visual reminder of when they have to do things. I think that's especially important in an online class." (Joyce)

Barriers That Inhibit Learner Self-Direction

Of the 11 study participants, 4 recognized and acknowledged several barriers to learner self-direction. Table 2 presents the seven barriers identified by the participants.

Table 2
Barriers to Learner Self-Direction

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Procrastination | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lack of technology skills | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Previous learning experiences/patterns | X | | | | | | | | | X | |
| Student needs more support | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Expectations | | | | | | | | | | X | |
| Lack of community | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Lack of confidence to admit need for assistance in writing | | | | | | | | | | | X |

Adam identified procrastination as a barrier to self-direction. He also acknowledged that one reason learners may procrastinate is because of their lack of technology skills.

> "Students procrastinate a lot. A lot of students procrastinate and I can't emphasize that enough because I know when stuff gets turned in and it's always or almost always at the last minute for about 80% of the students." (Adam)

> "I think a lot of them procrastinate because they lack some of the technology skills." (Adam)

Adam also identified previous learning experiences and patterns, particularly the amount of reinforcement or direction provided by previous instructors as a barrier to self-direction for some online students.

> "There are some students who are so used to going through school and having that teacher who held their hand all along saying this is what's due, this is when it's due, here's some class time to work on it, and now suddenly, here's a week, log in when you want to and to get stuff turned in you have until Sunday night at 6:00." (Adam)

Similarly, Beth felt that some learners required more direction, which she also termed "hand holding." Joyce identified that students may enroll in an online class with a set of expectations that may not be aligned with the reality of the structure of the course.

> "I had a student this week in the face-to-face meeting of this online class who said to me, 'You told us this in class but then you didn't reinforce that by writing online that this is due at such and such a date.' My reaction was that if this were a face-to-face class, I would tell you in class and that would be it. So, somehow he had a different expectation because it was an online class." (Joyce)

Karen attributed the lack of community and interaction with other students as a possible barrier to self-direction in an online environment.

> "I think if the student is out there by themselves, if they haven't become part of the learning community, I think that hinders them because they don't get support from their fellow students as they would in the face-to-face classroom." (Karen)

Karen also noted that learners may be uncomfortable in acknowledging that they may need assistance from the instructor and viewed this as a barrier to self-direction.

> "I think it's that students sometimes believe that it's a point of weakness to ask an instructor for help; showing that they don't know what to do. I get that in face- to-face classes but I think it's even harder, more difficult for students to email an

> instructor and state, 'I don't understand this, I'm lost'... because it's written, it's there, it's concrete." (Karen)

Emergent Thematic Categories: Learner Self-Direction

The 15 specific strategies identified by the instructors as ways that they encourage learner self-direction, along with the seven barriers to learner self-direction they identified, were further analyzed to see if there were any natural thematic categories that existed within the data. Three thematic categories emerged from the collected data through the analysis. The three thematic categories that emerged from the collected data are: (1) Identifying, Outlining, and Aligning Expectations; (2) Providing Frequent Guidance, Direction and Insistence; and (3) Recognizing and Accepting Learner Motivations.

Identifying, Outlining, and Aligning Expectations Identifying, outlining, and aligning expectations early and making those expectations clear and apparent emerged from the data as an important theme that describes what instructors do to encourage learner self-direction. Participants identified the learner's need to understand how online learning environments were different than face-to-face learning environments and noted that the learner did not always recognize the differences between the two learning formats. This often led to misaligned expectations of the demands and skills necessary for success in the online learning environment. Although there was recognition among the participants that identifying, outlining, and aligning expectations were important, not all study participants communicated their expectations similarly and a variety of techniques and strategies were employed. The techniques and strategies to identify and outline expectations ranged from posting the syllabus, to explicit descriptions and discussion. In

several instances study participants held face-to-face meetings, while others used technology such as audio files and stream casts to outline and clarify expectations. However, despite the varying methods used, the relevance and importance of identifying, outlining and aligning expectations emerged as a common theme among the study participants with respect to learner self-direction in online learning environments.

Providing Frequent Guidance, Direction and Insistence A second theme that emerged from the data that instructors identified as influencing self-direction among online learners was the providing of frequent guidance, direction and insistence. There was a clear recognition from the study participants that students often required additional reminders or further clarification beyond the initial outline of expectations and overview of the course. The study participants provided guidance, direction, and insistence through various means including face-to-face and personal email contact as well as explicit outlines and calendars of course timelines. Study participants acknowledged that the learner must adhere to timelines and due dates and recognized that students often found adherence to timelines difficult. Study participants identified procrastination and poor adherence to timelines as some of the reasons why they provided frequent guidance, direction and insistence in their online learning environments. The way in which the study participants provided frequent guidance, direction and insistence took several forms. Some instructors cajoled the learner through positive reinforcement and additional opportunities to satisfy requirements while others were strict in their methods by lower a grade or awarding fewer points to the assignment or project.

Recognizing and Accepting Learner Motivations The third theme that emerged from the data regarding instructors' encouragement of learner self-direction was recognition and acceptance that the decision to self-direct was ultimately the responsibility of the learner. The study participants believed the decision to self-direct was often based on the learner's personal motivations and expectations. In several instances, the study participants reinforced and/or explicitly stated the necessity for self-direction, yet they recognized that students were enrolled in the course for a variety of reasons and were guided by their own personal motivations. These personal motivations were often key to the learner's desire and commitment to self-direct and were beyond the influence of the instructor.

## Instructor Views of Learner Reflection

Learner reflection is the ability of the learner to reflect on prior experience and connect it with new information. The learner is conscious of self and examines previously held beliefs and assumptions through reflection in order to arrive at a new conclusion (Baxter Magolda, 1992; Brookfield, 1987; Friere, 1976; Jarvis, 1987; Mezirow, 1991; Perry, 1981; Schon, 1983). The learner is an active and engaged participant in the experience and learning is not a passive activity. In online learning environments instructors are unable to see the physical and non-verbal communications of the learner, which often reinforce the level of a student's understanding, comprehension, and intellectual growth. Given this characteristic, instructors were asked to identify observations of learner reflection they had made and how they viewed the role of learner reflection in online learning. Do they encourage learner reflection and if so,

how? Have they seen effective techniques or strategies for learner reflection and what, if any, are the barriers that inhibit learner reflection?

Irene compared how she identifies the reflective process in her face-to-face classroom as opposed to the difficulty in recognizing reflection in the online environment.

> "It's so hard to see in an online class. Students in my [face-to-face] classroom I can definitely see it, I can definitely see that they're kind of realizing things as they're discussing them. But my online students, I really can't tell." (Irene)

Karen compared the online class with a face-to-face class and believed that the students in online classes who were reflective, had a tendency to be more open when they reflected in the online environment and were less embarrassed to express their thoughts than students in face-to-face environments.

> "I think those students in an online class will have the tendency to reflect a little more openly, thinking that they're not saying it to a group of people. So there's not that embarrassment to take a stand. So I have found that discussion is a little bit easier sometimes in personal feelings in an online class than in face- to-face." (Karen)

Encouragement of Learner Reflection

Study participants identified a variety of methods they used to encourage reflection in online learning. A total of 12 different methods were identified as being useful. Table 3 presents the methods identified by each of the study participants.

Table 3
Methods for Encouraging Learner Reflection

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Class discussions | X | | X | X | X | | | | | X | X |
| Blogs | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Survey | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Formative Evaluation | | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Role Play | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Digital Stories | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Readings | X | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Writing Activity | | | X | | | | | | X | | X |
| Instructor Feedback | | | | | | | | X | X | | |
| Peer Feedback | | | | | | | | X | | | |
| Points | | | | | | | | | | X | X |
| Assignments and teaching methodology | | | X | | | | | | | | |

Six of the participants identified two or more techniques they used to encourage learner reflection while four participants identified only one technique they used to encourage learner reflection. One of the participants did not identify any technique used to encourage learner reflection.

Class discussions were the most common of the 12 techniques used to encourage learner reflection.

> "I do that with class discussion. I'll ask a question over the content." (Adam)
> "I think it's there in the discussion. They will start out in an argument in a discussion answering a question in one way and as they hear other opinions and ideas they are changing their opinions." (Connie)

Connie also added that the changes in the learner's thoughts during the discussion were more apparent in an online environment than in a face-to-face environment.

> "I think it [online] might make it [reflection] more visible to them because they can see the changes in their thoughts. In a [face-to-face] class discussion you might start off saying something, by the end of the discussion saying something else. But since it's all extemporaneous you might not even remember. But when it's in black and white and there's a record of it all semester you can definitely see your change in perspective." (Connie)

Denise and Joyce commented similarly by suggesting learners are more conscious of what they are saying online.

> "On the discussion board, you're more conscious of what you're going to say and I do find that." (Denise)

> "If I hold a class discussion in the [face-to-face] classroom, students are much more likely to offer opinions and they're not going to dig in class into the text find the page and quote and bring that up in class. They're not going to do that very often. But if you're sitting at your computer as an online learner and you know the instructor expects that you support your ideas you will provide support. That there is a depth that is really wonderful." (Joyce)

Adam required his students to write blogs during the semester.

> "They do six blogs throughout the semester and that's where I have them do reflection and so it's possible to do it." (Adam)

Adam also conducted a weekly survey which he felt encouraged the learners to reflect on their experience.

> "I do a weekly survey, the last two questions are 'what would you change about this particular online session and what difficulties did you have in this online session.' (Adam)

Similarly Gloria conducted a mid-term evaluation which she felt encouraged reflection.

> "I put about 4 questions out at the midterm. As a formative evaluation, it's totally anonymous. I ask, you know, what is going well with the course, what could the faculty person do differently, and then what are you [student] doing well and what could you do better in order to achieve the outcomes of the course. So I guess those last two questions cause some self-reflection." (Gloria)

Adam also indicated that he used role play as a reflection technique.

> "Some times I give them a role play and say you be a parent, you be a student, you be teacher, and you be an administrator. In that sense they're not reflecting on their own perspective but somebody else's perspective. But that's still reflecting on the material but not presenting their own viewpoint necessarily." (Adam)

Adam added:

> "I'm asking them to reflect on how they learn and to think of how to think of students with other learning styles might have learned better had it been done something different." (Adam)

Karen used digital storytelling as a way to encourage reflection.

> "I did some digital storytelling with some students. The digital story is based upon why they want to become an educator. When we interviewed students on how they reflected upon what they were doing, they were very quizzical as to what I meant about reflection. A couple of students said, 'I guess I didn't reflect'. Students don't understand reflection. I've been reading up a little bit on reflection to try to weave that more into my digital stories. I think it's a very difficult thing for a student to do." (Karen)

Beth believed that the choices of readings encouraged reflection.

> "I think because of the readings I select. I don't use a textbook, I'm always looking for articles and I put them on e-reserve and I think that those readings automatically call for self reflection and I think my assignments call for self-reflection." (Beth)

Three of the participants, Connie, Irene, and Karen encouraged reflection through writing activities.

> My final essay, was a take home exam telling what they learned in class and what did they do to make it happen. They had to think back on everything we did in class, everything they did in class and to really make that part of the process." (Connie)

> "I do a meta-cognitive activity. For every draft of the formal papers they write they have to write a process letter. I have them give their first draft to a small group and they can post their essay on file exchange. They write comments and feedback to each other and then discuss them in their own little group discussion board. It can be like peer editing or a workshop. With this process they have to reflect on what they wrote, why they wrote it, what were their problems in writing it, what do they think they achieved when they wrote it, what kind of help do they want from us as collaborators to help them develop their ideas further." (Connie)

> "Hopefully they're learning about themselves and learning about their field. You can see their excitement in their writing. And you see that you start to see excitement toward the learning of writing." (Irene)

> "I have them write what they think, what they believe, how they feel, and their reaction. But it's difficult." (Karen)

Howard compared the process of reflection in online environments to the face-to-face environment. Initially he stated there was no difference in how he provided feedback to students. However, as he continued to speak he acknowledged that he felt that he gave more feedback while online.

> "I don't think there's much different from an ordinary [face-to-face] class. I mean I give the same written feedback I do on papers, I just do it through email as opposed to writing it on the paper. I actually give a little more thorough feedback because I can just do it rapidly on the keyboard. I think they [the students] react to that, reflect on that. Positively or negatively and they get the same thing from other students in the peer feedback." (Howard)

Howard suggested that students perhaps take peer feedback more seriously online.

> "I think they take it a little more seriously, peer feedback. Maybe reflect a little more, which is good and they begin to recognize that these other students in the class are their audience, their real audience, not the teacher. I think that's good." (Howard.)

Both Joyce and Karen encourage reflection through points and credit for assignments and participation.

> "I think they've become pretty self aware. They are very consciously doing these things. They know because we've said in scoring each of these assignments you earn point for this and this." (Joyce)

"I usually do participation. If they do it then they get the credit for it. I think if I could get them to reflect at all, I think that's a positive thing." (Karen)

Connie believed that her methodology and way of presenting the material encouraged reflection.

"I try to set the tone for that in the very beginning with the first orientation to the class, through my methodologies, throughout the syllabus, throughout the course and through my announcements." (Connie)

Effective Techniques for Promoting Learner Reflection

Of the 11 study participants interviewed, no one indicated that he or she had seen any other instructors apply any effective techniques or strategies for learner reflection.

Interviewer: Have you participated in any techniques or seen other faculty or instructors use similar or different techniques to encourage reflection?

"I know that some instructors use weekly quizzes. I don't think giving a 10 question quiz is necessarily asking your students to reflect on their learning or on the content, it's asking them to remember." (Adam)

"No, not really" (Frank)

"No, I haven't. I haven't read on it a lot. (Karen)

Adam mentioned that he had not had any students explicitly tell him they had applied any techniques. However, he did mention that perhaps he should consider adding a question about strategies students use for reflection during his weekly survey.

"I can't think of anything that a learner has told me they do. I could ask what students are doing. Maybe that's a good question for my survey. What strategies did you use to reflect on the material this week or did you reflect? I don't know. But I don't do that right now." (Adam)

Gloria expressed a similar sentiment that perhaps she, as an instructor, needed to talk more to students about their learning styles and about the online learning environment.

"Maybe we need to build more in so that they we talk to them more in-depth about their learning styles because it is a bit different environment." (Gloria)

Finally, Denise expressed how the experience of teaching online had forced her to reflect on her own teaching.

> "When I started teaching online or even teaching, that shook my world. I had to start thinking about the way I was doing things. That for me was very powerful. As a teacher, yes, I have to reexamine totally how I'm teaching. I have to trust the students to choreograph a conversation that typically I'm in charge of choreographing. I have to give up some of the way I think it ought to be. And then I have to teach differently." (Denise)

Barriers That Inhibit Learner Reflection

Of the 11 study participants, 3 participants identified barriers they believed inhibited learner reflection. Table 4 presents the barriers identified by the participants.

Table 4
Barriers to Learner Reflection

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Shared responsibility | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Motivation of learner | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Not expectation | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Caution | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Level of cognitive development | | | | | | | | | | | X |

Adam discussed the shared responsibility of both the instructor and the learners and recognized that students may not recognize that reflection is an expectation.

> "I guess it's probably a shared responsibility. I think instructors probably don't ask learners to do that very often. I don't like to sound negative but I think a lot of students are just trying to do what they have to do to get the grade they want to get and move on to the next class. That does sound negative but I think part of that responsibility is the instructor to make the learning meaningful." (Adam)

> "I don't think learners know that [reflection] is an expectation." (Adam)

Beth believed that a barrier to reflection was the students' own fear of expressing themselves due to the nature of the content of her course.

> "I think that there's a fear factor with some because of the sensitive things we discuss; racism, prejudice, stereotypes, hatred. I think some students are automatically cautious about what they say." (Beth)

Of the study participants, Karen commented most on reflection as an important aspect of learning and believed that some learners, particularly undergraduate students, were not cognitively prepared or mature enough to understand the importance of reflection in the learning process.

> "I don't think it's natural for any undergraduate student to reflect. I think when I get to my graduate students I've had an easier time in having them think about it. Some students will never reflect, just can't reflect. They have not had the practice with it, especially in undergraduate. They just don't get what you're asking." (Karen)

Karen continued to add:

> "I don't know whether it has been defined to them what reflection really is. I don't know." (Karen)

Emergent Thematic Categories: Learner Reflection

The 12 specific strategies identified by the instructors as ways that they encourage learner reflection, along with the four barriers to learner reflection they identified, were further analyzed to see if there were any natural thematic categories that existed within the data. Three thematic categories emerged from the collected data through this analysis. The three thematic categories that emerged from the collected data are: (1) Providing Opportunities for Dialogue, Communication, and Feedback; (2) Recognizing and Accepting the Learners Cognitive and Developmental Ability; and (3) Expanding the Role of Written Expression.

Providing Opportunities for Dialogue, Communication, and Feedback Providing the opportunity for dialogue, communication, and feedback emerged from the data as an important theme that describes what instructors do to encourage learner reflection. The study participants provided the opportunity for the learner to engage in dialogue, communication and feedback with another classmate and/or classmates, as well as with the instructor through a variety of methods. These included class discussions and role play activities, as well as formative evaluations. The strategies used to encourage learner reflection, required some form of exchange of ideas or perspective.

Recognizing and Accepting the Learners Cognitive and Developmental Ability A second theme that emerged from the data that instructors identified as influencing learner reflection was recognizing the level of cognitive and developmental ability of the learner. The study participants acknowledged that it was likely that some students did not possess the cognitive or developmental ability or skills to reflect, nor did all students understand the role and relevance of reflection in the learning experience. Although there was recognition among the participants that they could not control whether the student reflected, the participants stated it was possible to influence the process through activities or exercises that either implicitly or explicitly challenged the learner to reflect.

Expanding the Role of Written Expression The third theme that emerged from the data regarding instructors' encouragement of learner reflection was identified as expanding the role of written expression. Writing emerged as a critical and beneficial aspect of the online experience that encouraged learner reflection. The study participants

acknowledged that the discussion comments of the online students were often more prepared and thoughtful than the verbal comments made during discussions in face-to-face environments. The participants also recognized that although reflection was not always easily identified in online learning environments, they acknowledged that in responding to discussions online, the learners were often more conscious of their comments and often provided more in-depth responses or comments to discussion questions than learners in face-to-face classes. In addition, the changes in the learner's thought process were more apparent in the online environment. This allowed the study participant to track the process and changes in the learner's understanding of concepts as well as of self.

## Instructor Views of Learner Community

Learner community is an environment where discourse is encouraged and learners are free to engage in dialogue which is supportive of alternative views (Habermas, 1970). In a distance education environment, because the learners are separated by time and distance, opportunities for dialogue and discourse are often limited and as Kember (1989) suggests, the learner in online learning environments can often feel isolated and may withdraw from the learning process. Given this characteristic, instructors were asked to describe their observations of learner community they and how they viewed the role of learner community in online learning. Do they encourage learner community and if so, how? Have they seen effective techniques or strategies for creating or sustaining a learner community and what, if any, are the barriers that inhibit learner community?

When asked the importance of the learner community in online environments, most participants felt that a community of learners was important for a variety of reasons.

Many indicated that the idea of building connectedness and sharing with peers was critical to the learning experience.

> "I think it's [community] very important. I really want them to learn more from each other than they do from me." (Beth)

> "I think that it's important to try out your ideas, sift through other people's perception, to hear other people's ideas. I think that's where growth takes place. And if you don't have a strong learning community, that doesn't happen." (Denise)

> "I think it's important in any class because I think learning isn't just about an individual taking on a new topic or a new process and learning that process. It's a synergistic process." (Joyce)

> "I feel that sense of community is essential because they [the students] should be able to learn from each other online" (Karen)

Gloria associated overall student satisfaction of the learning experience with being connected with the learning environment.

> "I think they're much more satisfied with the course if they feel they are part of the course and part of a learning environment. I think feeling part of that learning environment is crucial to establish in an online course." (Gloria)

Edward acknowledged the importance of the learning community but felt that, for him, it was much easier to promote a learning community in a face-to-face class than it was in an online environment.

> "I think that's [community] important. And maybe that's one of the reasons I prefer face-to-face because it is easy to promote a community feeling." (Edward)

Denise echoed a similar sentiment and acknowledged that she also felt she was better able to encourage a learner community in a face-to-face environment.

> "I think I could do a better job of encouraging community face-to–face." (Denise)

Encouragement of Learner Community

The study participants identified a total of 14 different methods used to encourage learner community in an online environment. Table 5 presents the methods identified by each of the study participants.

Table 5
Methods for Encouraging Learner Community

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Groups | X | X | | | | | X | X | | X | X |
| Photo | X | | X | | | X | X | | | | |
| Discussion Board | X | | | | X | X | X | | | | |
| Lounge Coffee Break | X | | | | | X | X | | | | |
| Instructor participation | X | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Phone | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Homepages | | | X | | | | | | | | |
| Icebreakers | | | X | | X | | | | | | |
| Grades | | | X | | | | | | | | |
| « netiquette » rules | | | X | | | | | | | | |
| Face-to-face session(s) | | | | | X | | | | | X | |
| Sharing events/articles | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Question & answer forum | X | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Bio's | | | | | | | | | | X | |

Of the eleven study participants, seven of the participants identified multiple approaches to encourage a learning community online. Two participants identified a

single method they used to encourage learner community and two participants did not identify any method. Small groups and group projects were the most widely reported methods used by the study participants to promote a learning community online.

> "You can establish groups on line."(Beth)
>
> "I do two exercises where I pair them up or put them in small groups and have them work together. (Howard)
>
> "One of the things that we do in our online courses is require group projects." (Joyce)
>
> "With my online courses I have attempted to do partner work and teamwork. Some form of collaborative work together. That's the only way I know how to encourage it." (Karen)

Gloria felt that the small groups facilitated connectedness and indicated she noticed the support students provided to one another in these groups.

> "And the students really do become somewhat cohesive in those groups. And you can see the support. They offer suggestions for interventions, so I think the use of small groups facilitates that connectedness and they feel supported by one another." (Gloria)

Adam, Connie, Frank, and Gloria required the students to post a photo online as a means of familiarizing the students with one another.

> "On the first day of class every student will take a picture and I make the little avatar so every time you make a post your little picture shows up with your signature. They write their name and what they want to teach. That helps to kind of illustrate where people are coming from." (Adam)
>
> "I make them all post a picture and do the homepage thing." (Connie)
>
> "I ask them for photos of themselves so they actually know what everyone looks like." (Frank)

Gloria also recognized that posting a photo of each student not only assisted the others in the class, she as the instructor also benefited from the photos as they helped her to associate individual postings with the individual student.

> "I take pictures and then I post the pictures online with their names on them so that it not only helps me when I'm reading the discussion board but hopefully it helps the other people to associate a name and a face with what is being said." (Gloria)

Although Joyce has tried to use photos as a tool for encouraging a learner community she found that students did not always follow up because they either did not know how to post a photo online or it was too difficult to do.

> "I ask them to post photos and they just didn't know how to do that or it was cumbersome." (Joyce)

Another common means for encouraging learner community among the study participants was the use of class discussions and discussion boards.

> "I have weekly discussions and they're [the students] required to participate." (Adam)

> "I would ask them on the discussion board about something they've read and ask them to post a comment about it and answer another student's comment." (Frank)

Although Edward used discussion boards in his online class, he said that he did not feel that the tool encouraged the learning community as much as immediate conversation did in face-to-face environments.

> "I guess the discussion board is a great tool but it's not the immediate thing. If we're having conversation and we're discussing something, I might type something on a discussion board and three days later somebody might read it and respond. There's not that spontaneity that I think you have in actual face-to-face situations." (Edward)

Edward also acknowledged that he felt that face-to-face meetings were very important and that if he were to teach an online class again in the future he would try using a synchronous method, where students would be required to meet online at a specific time.

> "It's easy to sit at a discussion board and read my introduction, or if we're discussing a particular topic to do the discussion, but there's got to be a face-to-face component. If I were going to do this again online I probably would go to a virtual classroom type of thing, or use something like SKYPE for example. I think seeing a person is important and having the interaction." (Edward)

Three of the study participants created an online location for informal discussion which the participants either labeled "lounge" or a "coffee break room". These discussions were meant to be informal and casual.

> "I set up a coffee break room, and I just say this is just a spot where you can talk about pretty much what you want to with your peers. So, if you want to share recipes, if you want to tell them something personal. Whatever you want to share, that's your business. I always put it out there, just to make sure they feel connected with their other classmates. It points an avenue for them to feel that connectedness which is really vital to establish in an online class." (Gloria)

> "I also have a forum called 'the lounge' and I tell them they can talk about anything except class. I'll ask if they've seen any movies lately. I ask them to give us a review or I ask whether they've read any books, seen any television shows. The students will jump in and talk. I think it enhances my class greatly and I think I get to know the community of learners much better when I teach online and use this lounge than standing up in front of the class." (Adam)

Adam also went on to say that in addition to being a place for students to connect, 'the lounge' helped him to feel less isolated and more connected to the class.

> "I enjoy it [lounge] as much as the students do. It helps me feel like I'm not all alone. I know that a lot of my students say the same thing. They don't quite feel like they're sitting at home by themselves when they can log in and have a quick discussion over the best pizza delivery company in the area." (Adam)

Frank referred to this informal discussion as "one where they can talk about whatever they want to," and described it as chatting "about anything with your fellow classmates just as you would in the classroom." Frank also observed that females were more likely to participate in the informal discussions, while males were not as likely to participate.

> "It's all girls that do this, boys don't get into chat rooms. They won't share things." (Frank )

Both Edward and Connie use some type of introductory activity or icebreaker at the beginning of the class to encourage the learner community.

> "We would always do some activities where students would introduce themselves to the others and that seemed to work really well just from the initial contact." (Edward)

> "We have some introductory exercises where they might post a public secret. Those kinds of icebreakers." (Connie)

Both Beth and Adam believed that the instructor's participation in the discussions encouraged a community in the online environment.

> "I post online too. I may say, "Guess what happened to me today?" And then tell them something funny. I don't know, just things that pop into my mind. Even though I want them to learn more from each other than they do from me, I want to keep the lines of communication open." (Beth)

> "I try to make the lounge a fun experience and I try to participate in all the discussions I can to show the students I enjoy interacting with them." (Adam)

In addition to the lounge, Adam also used a forum for question and answers.

> "I have a class question forum that's not required, but any student can pose any question. So rather than email me a question, they individually post on the Q&A forum. That way everybody can see my response." (Adam)

Gloria also used a similar forum for question and answers and found that not only did it encourage communication among the learners, it eliminated many of the emails and phone calls she received.

> "I set up a forum called 'questions and answers'. I told the students that this is their chance to post questions. I told them that maybe the faculty may answer it or a student may answer if they know the answer. I told them could ask any question. I don't have as many phone calls. I don't have as many personal emails as I used to. I think it is really an excellent forum for the student to ask questions." (Gloria)

Beth encouraged students to post supplemental information such as articles that related to the course materials.

> "If they come across an event, an article, an experience, anything that pertains to the focus of the class, I encourage them to share it online. Let's talk about it." (Beth)

She also encouraged students to exchange phone numbers.

Connie believed that a conversation about civil discourse and communication assisted in encouraging the learner community.

> "When we have those discussions we talk about how to respond, 'netiquette' types of things, but beyond that it has more to do with civil discourse." (Connie)

Connie also believed that she was able to encourage the learner community through grading and that she believed it was easier to monitor than in a face-to-face class.

> "They have to talk to each other if they are going to get any kind of grade. I can hold their feet to the fire for those discussions in a way that I can't in a face-to-face class. In a face-to-face class you can hide in a corner and not say a word. I might call on a student occasionally, but if a student has a different opinion they don't have to put it out there. And somehow I think most of them do offer their opinion in the online class because it's harder to fake. " (Connie)

Finally, referencing her initial face-to face meeting with the online students, Joyce indicated that without a face-to-face component of the class, it was difficult to develop a personal relationship online.

> "Once there is a face-to-face meeting, you begin to have a personal relationship. I think it is a very positive thing. But for the student we never ever meet, it's much more difficult to create that sense that the professor cares about the student." (Joyce)

Effective Techniques for Establishing Learner Community

Several of the study participants said they had participated in conversations about learner community in online environments. Adam indicated that he had shared some of the techniques he used to encourage learner community, but did not know whether any of his colleagues used any of the strategies he shared.

> "I don't know. I go to these meetings and I tell people about the lounge and they all think it's a neat idea but I don't know if any implement it." (Adam)

Adam also mentioned that he felt some frustration among online instructors and their ability to develop a learner community on line.

"I know people complain about trying to develop community online." (Adam)

He went on to say that he felt there were several ways to encourage an online learning community yet the only strategy he had seen others use were group projects.

> "I think in some of the models of online classes that I've experienced, the only community is when an instructor creates a group project and says meet with these people." (Adam)

Irene indicated she had heard instructors used chat rooms but did not know for certain whether chats were used as means to encourage learner community by online instructors.

"I've heard of people doing a chat, but I don't know." (Irene)

Barriers That Inhibit Learner Community

Of the 11 study participants, eight participants identified a total of 11 barriers they believed inhibited the learner community online. Table 6 presents the specific barriers identified by the study participants.

Table 6
Barriers to Learner Community

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Busy Lives | X | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Multiple commitments | X | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Learner motivations | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Generational differences | | X | | X | | | | | | | |
| Lack of responsibility | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Motivation for selection | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Lack of collaborative learning experience | | | | | | | | | | | X |
| Student personalities | X | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Technology | X | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Content | | | X | | | | | | | | |
| Lack of immediate or spontaneous communication | | | | | X | | X | X | | | |

Adam, Beth, and Denise believed that busy lives and multiple commitments were barriers that inhibited the learner community.

> "I don't know. It could be they have busy lives. They're mothers, fathers, and have a family. Full-time jobs. They don't desire to be part of a community. I don't know." (Adam)

> "Maybe it's a struggle with other commitments, a lot of these students are married, they have families, they work, and they're going to school pursuing a degree. They have a lot on their plates." (Beth)

Denise acknowledged that students have active lives but identified different types of activities students engage in than did Adam and Beth. Denise drew a distinction between the motivations students have for taking online classes and how the difference in motivation may hinder the learner community.

> "I think one of the barriers is an active life. There are parties on campus. Students have a lot of things to do and this online class is kind of an add on. This is different from the student who is taking an online class because it's a connection with a whole bunch of other people that they wouldn't ordinarily talk to." (Denise)

Denise also added that she noticed a generational difference between students that she believed influenced the learner community.

> "I see a difference in commitment between younger students and older students." (Denise)

Similarly, Karen used the example of students passively attending classes to describe how some students approach the online learning environments.

> "Students are not ready for an online environment and they're taking it thinking it's going to be the same things as the face-to-face class. Thinking that it is going to be purely instructor led and their responsibility is no more than logging on just as their responsibility is sometimes in a face- to- face is no more than showing up." (Karen)

Denise also commented on students attitudes and motivations for participating in the online class as a barrier to the learner community.

> "I also think that a barrier to building community exists within an individual attitude or an individual perception." (Denise)

She went on to discuss her concerns about those students taking classes because they did not have to physically attend the class.

> "A student joins the class just because it fits with their schedule and that way they can take an extra class because they don't have to show up at this class. That worries me a little bit." (Denise)

Karen commented that she felt many students did not know how to collaborate and participate in a community of learners.

> "I think there is a lack of knowing how to exist in a community of learners, how to collaborate in learning, and how to carry on a discussion." (Karen)

Additionally, both Adam and Beth recognized that student personalities may be barriers that hinder the learner community. Adam suggested that some students were not as social as others and were less likely to participate.

> "I think that some students are just not as social as other students or they're just nervous that they're going to look silly if they write something. I know I have students who don't or rarely participate in the lounge for example." (Adam)

While Beth felt that perhaps for those students who were less likely to communicate in the face-to-face environment might be more inclined to communicate online.

> "There are students who are shy in the classroom who might be more apt to communicate online and then there are students who don't like the online setting and would prefer to spend more time in the classroom." (Beth)

She added that students who may be taking their first online class may also be less likely to communicate online.

Both Adam and Beth believed that technology inhibited learner community. Adam particularly mentioned that those students who used dial-up connections were less like to participate in the online community because of the slow speeds and inconsistencies of dial-up technology.

Beth believed that most students had the technical skills necessary yet recognized that there may be students who were still unfamiliar with the technology used in online environments.

> "Most of these students are pretty computer savvy, technologically savvy. Then again maybe a student who is 54 years old who has come back to school after a

> long absence is not really that familiar with the use of computers and maybe it's more of a struggle. So that could be a barrier." (Beth)

Connie indicated that the material covered and the content of the course can inhibit the learner community.

> "Part of it is the material. The material is highly charged and students can be sensitive." (Connie)

Finally, Edward, Gloria, and Howard felt that the lack of immediate and spontaneous contact and feedback were barriers to the learner community. Edward commented that the virtual classroom, [a synchronous environment] would be able to facilitate immediate and spontaneous comments and responses.

> "There isn't the immediate contact. In a virtual classroom if someone makes a comment it gets me thinking and I can immediately respond and they can immediately respond and so on. Whereas if I'm typing a message, I might have had another thought so it's not the immediate responses to the discussion." (Edward)

Gloria compared the lack of spontaneous conversation of the online environment with the more immediate environment of the face-to-face class.

> "When you're in a regular classroom the students can sit next to each other, and chat about their children or personal things. You feel that camaraderie. In an online environment because they don't sit next to each other, they don't see each other face-to-face. It's more difficult to make them feel like they are a part of a class taking a class together." (Gloria)

Howard also commented on the lack of instant response and feedback and expressed that the online learning community was a different community than that of a face-to-face environment.

> "There's no body language in email. There isn't instant feedback like in the face-to-face classroom. It's a different kind of community. I don't even know if you'd call it a community. It's kind of a strange thing." (Howard)

Emergent Thematic Categories: Describe Learner Community

The 14 specific strategies identified by the instructors as ways that they encouraged learner community, along with the11 barriers to learner community they identified, were further analyzed to see if there were any natural thematic categories that existed within the data. Three thematic categories emerged from the collected data through this analysis. The three thematic categories that emerged from the collected data are: (1) Participating in the Experience; (2) Providing Opportunity for Formal and Informal Communication; and (3) Recognizing and Accepting Learner Characteristics and Motivations.

Participating in the Experience Participating in the learning experience emerged from the data as an important theme that describes what instructors do to encourage the development of a learning community online. The study participants acknowledged the relevance of the learners recognizing that the instructor is a part of the learning community and participates in the exchange of ideas. The participants were also conscious that it was necessary to convey to the learners that the instructor cared about the learners' success in the online course. Several of the study participants commented that without some type of face-to-face meeting, developing the relationship with the learners as a group, and more specifically as individuals, was difficult in the online environment.

Providing Opportunity for Formal and Informal Communication A second theme that emerged from the data that instructors identified as influencing the learner community was providing opportunities for both formal and informal communication.

All study participants provided opportunities for formal dialogue among and between the learners as well as with the instructor. This was done in several ways but primarily through the formal assignment of group discussions or projects. In addition to providing formal opportunities for discussion and communication, several study participants provided additional opportunities for learners to participate in informal conversations completely unrelated to the course content. The study participants who also provided informal opportunities such as "the lounge" believed these informal opportunities simulated a similar experience the learner might have in a face-to-face classroom. Related to this, several of the study participants felt that the immediacy and spontaneity of the face-to-face class was difficult to replicate in the online environment and believed that to be a disadvantage of the communication opportunities afforded in online environments.

Recognizing and Accepting Learner Characteristics and Motivations The third theme that emerged from the data regarding instructors' encouragement of a learner community was recognizing and accepting learner characteristics and motivations. The characteristics and motivations of the learner were identified in a variety of ways and fell along a continuum of manifestations ranging from generational differences among the participants, to reasons for selection of the course, to personality traits. Each of these characteristics and motivations, from the views of the study participants, impacted the degree to which the learner participated in the development of the online learner community.

## Instructor Views of Learner Persistence

Learner persistence is the learner's decision to continue involvement in the learning experience rather than terminate involvement. Although there are no definitive answers as to why students depart from a learning experience, persistence and retention in distance education (Fjortoft, 1995; Kember, 1989; Sweet, 1986), and specifically online programming (Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2004; Woodley, 2004), emerge as a concern in the literature. Given this phenomenon of online learning experiences, instructors were asked to describe their observations of learner persistence and how they viewed the role of persistence in online learning. Do they encourage learner persistence and if so, how? Have they seen effective techniques or strategies for learner persistence and what, if any, are the barriers that inhibit learner persistence?

Several study participants agreed that encouraging learner persistence was important and possible. Beth specifically acknowledged the importance of instructors encouraging learner persistence, yet also believed that the student had a role and responsibility in the process as well.

> "I think it's [encouraging persistence] very important but I also think that we have to remember that the students are really the ones who have to accept the responsibility in any type of learning environment." (Beth)

Adam also believed it was possible to encourage learner persistence and also acknowledged that many students do not persist in his online course. He attributed the high rate of attrition to his high expectations of the students in his online course.

> "I think it's probably possible. I have the highest drop out rate of any other instructor, so more of my students dropout. I think I'm thorough in how I cover the material and I expect a lot from my students." (Adam)

Encouragement of Learner Persistence

Study participants identified a variety of different methods they used to encourage learner persistence in online learning. A total of nine different methods were identified as being useful. Eight study participants identified at least one method they used to encourage learner persistence. Four study participants identified more than one method used. Three study participants did not identify any method for encouraging learner persistence. Table 7 presents the methods identified by each of the study participants.

Table 7
Methods for Encouraging Learner Persistence

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Encouraging Words | X | | | | | | X | | | X | |
| Positive reinforcement | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Individual communication | | | X | X | | | | | | | X |
| Face-to-face meetings | | | | X | X | | | | | | |
| Clear Expectations | X | | | | | | | | | | |
| Content Interesting | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Creativity of instructor | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Instructor student friendly/ positive attitude | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Tips | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Coffee Break forum | | | | | | | X | | | | |

Of the nine different methods used by the study participants to encourage learner persistence, individual communication with the student, offering encouraging words and positive reinforcement to students emerged as the most frequently identified.

> "I try to provide some encouraging words. I try to give them feedback in emails. I might say 'I know last week was extra hard, this week will be a little easier. I hope you have a renewed sense of vigor as you approach the class next week', or whatever it is." (Adam)

> "I think that you have to give the students positive reinforcement that, yes, this is going well and positive reinforcement, I think is key." (Gloria)

Joyce stated that students occasionally explicitly identify their concerns and she indicated the importance of responding and providing encouragement to the student.

> "Sometimes I get emails where the student is feeling frustrated, concerned, or worried. I always respond to those. I always give back a rather lengthy email usually addressing the concerns and saying it's ok, they are on the right track. They are dong fine. I tell them to have confidence, but I don't think it's the same as in person." (Joyce)

Connie similarly mentioned that she kept in contact with the students and provided them opportunities to complete missed assignments.

> "I try to keep in touch with them. I have offered remedies at different times. For someone who has fallen behind I let them make up a couple missing assignments." (Connie)

Denise also recognized that students may not persist and believed that by "reaching out" to the student the instructor may be able to encourage persistence.

> "I think that there are a lot of things you can do. I think the professor's involvement or visibility is important. I also think reaching out to the student is important. There are a lot of student that could give up easily." (Denise)

Much like Denise's recognition that students can struggle in the class, Karen also provided opportunity for the student to talk with her.

> "I had a student who got off to a bad start. There was just no question about that, a very, very bad start. She wanted to drop the class. I told her let's talk. We went through a lot of emails." (Karen)

Although Karen's communication with the student was largely through email, she did encourage the student to meet with her face-to-face.

> "We went through a couple emails and finally she came in face-to-face. We got her caught up and she was fine. But it was a lot of individual communication with her. She would write me 2-3 times a day, because she really didn't know what to do."(Karen)

Similarly, Edward saw the value of face-to-face meetings in encouraging persistence.

> "I think the three face-to-face meetings are valuable in an online situation because you can get them back in the classroom and you can say ok now we've got to get back on to this or to this. It's just easier to direct them." (Edward)

Adam believed that clarifying expectations encouraged students to persist.

> "I think it's [encouraging persistence] important. I think maybe it's that I try to be very clear in the expectations I have right up front. Some students, that scares them." (Adam)

Beth placed emphasis on the content and material of the course as a means of encouraging learner persistence.

> "I think the course content overall is interesting stuff. This is an opportunity for them to learn more about themselves and I think that keeps them persistent. I think that keeps them participating in it." (Beth)

She also believed that in addition to interesting course materials her creativity and attitude also encouraged learner persistence.

> "I think the materials I use in this course encourage persistence. I'm always looking for ways to keep myself fresh. I like variety. I'm pretty creative. I think all of that keeps them persistent. I think my creativity encourages their creativity and I think getting to know me keeps them persistent." (Beth)

> "I think a lot of it is the attitude of the instructor. I think that if the instructor has a positive attitude and instructor is student friendly. I think just naturally my students know that I really care about their success." (Beth)

Denise provided the students with a sheet that outlines a checklist of strategies students might employ in order to be successful in the online class, as well as steps to take if they were considering dropping the class.

> "A sheet. It just says, how to survive an online class. It's got all the things like organization, print all the material, call me before you think about dropping. It has about 10-15 suggestions on that check list. I always give that to people. I use it all the time." (Denise)

Gloria found that the 'coffee break' was a means of encouraging persistence of the online learner.

> "In an online environment I always put the coffee break room for the students. I say it is not a requirement for the course. I also tell them that I may or may not read what's in there. But sometimes I just glance through there and you can see some work issues; whether they have been really busy at work or whatever. You can just tell if they're having difficulty with a supervisor. The coffee break could be the mechanism to encourage learner persistence." (Gloria")

Effective Techniques for Promoting Learner Persistence

Of the 11 participants interviewed, none of the participants indicated they had seen other instructors apply any effective techniques or strategies that encouraged learner persistence.

> "I haven't. I haven't heard anyone's stories but I'm sure they exist." (Adam)

> "Its hard to answer because I'm not sure what instructors do." (Karen)

Gloria identified several things she had seen instructors do that she believed did not encourage learner persistence.

> "I think there are some faculty that aren't cognizant of the student's issues. I have heard of some faculty who have put out a whole bunch of information and then expected a student to take a test the next day. So they aren't cognizant of students' work schedules or of their family commitments. They don't give them adequate time in order to plan, to be able to complete the requirements for the course." (Gloria)

She continued to add.

> "They [some instructors] put out huge files, which is a challenge for students with their Internet connections. I think you have to be cognizant that not everybody has high speed Internet connections. Not everybody can be sitting by the computer waiting for the faculty member to decide what they're going to do. I think it has to be well organized. If it's not well organized I think it's a recipe for disaster." (Gloria)

Adam indicated that, in addition to not being aware of any specific techniques other instructors may use to encourage persistence, he was not aware of any specific strategies students applied either. Although he indicated he was certain students did have strategies.

> "I don't know what they [students] do but I'm sure they do stuff." (Adam)

On the other hand, Beth believed that the students encouraged one another to persist. She attributed it to the online environment providing a less threatening environment for communication than a face-to-face learning environment which she believed appealed to some students.

> "I think they [students] encourage each other to be persistent. I think it's a communication factor. Maybe more freedom for a lot of them, more of a sense of security online because they're not really visible, they're not talking in front of a person in the classroom and they're not nervous. They're at home chances are or a computer lab but nobody around them knows what they're saying because they're typing it online. They feel safer, less threatened." (Beth)

Barriers That Inhibit Learner Persistence

The study participants identified ten barriers they believed inhibit learner persistence online. All participants stated at least one barrier to learner persistence and five participants identified multiple barriers. Table 8 presents the barriers that inhibit learner persistence identified by each of the study participants.

Table 8
Barriers to Learner Persistence

| | Adam | Beth | Connie | Denise | Edward | Frank | Gloria | Howard | Irene | Joyce | Karen |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lack of self-discipline | X | | | | | | | | X | X | |
| Lack of organization | | | | X | | | | | | | X |
| Procrastination | | X | | X | X | | | | | | X |
| Lack of specific meeting times | | X | | | | | | | | | |
| Perception easier than face-to-face | | | X | X | | | | | | | |
| Lack necessary commitment | | | | X | | | | | | | |
| Too difficult/more work than expected | | | | | | X | | | | X | |
| Work | | X | | | | | X | | | | |
| Finances | | | | | | | X | | | | |
| Technology | | | | | | | | X | | X | |
| Lack of connection with instructor | | | | | | | | | | X | |

Adam compared online environments to face-to-face environments and suggested that the barriers students face are similar in both learning environments.

> "I think students in face-to-face environments that have barriers will have the same barriers they encounter in online. Some students are going to fail regardless of the environment they are in and I'm sure that there are some that fail only in online environments but I don't know what the barriers are." (Adam)

Although Adam indicated he wasn't sure what the barriers might be, he did suggest, along with both Joyce and Irene, that lack of self-discipline may be a barrier to persistence in online learning environments.

> "Students who are not self-starters have much difficulty in online learning because they're expected to get going on their own and I don't know what causes them to not be self-starters." (Adam)

> "I think they think this is overwhelming and they maybe they know they're not going to be self-disciplined and be able to keep up with this. Nobody is telling you what to do or when a paper is due." (Irene)

> "I think some of them are not self-directed enough to do it. To sit down and say I will block out this time each week for doing this class and doing it online and communicating during the time period that I need to." (Joyce)

Coupled with the lack of self-discipline, Denise, Karen, Beth, and Edward recognized lack of organization and procrastination as barriers to learner persistence.

> "Organization. And it's just more work than they [the student] thought it would be. And procrastination. It's online, she's not collecting it. I don't have to face her and tell her I don't have the work done. All I have to do is not do it. To me that's part of that whole organization piece." (Denise)

> "I think they get behind. They truly do not realize that every week usually in an online class you've got some thing, and a lot of it takes much longer to type than it does to say. Just to speak in a class, I think they just get behind." ( Karen)

> "The slacking. Kind of along with that I think they may post everyday online. They may respond every day to an article but again it's likely to be 2 sentences and there's no depth." (Beth)

> "I found was there was a lot of procrastination." (Edward)

As a related comment, Edward shared an anecdote about a student who had completely forgotten that he had registered for the online class.

> "I had one student who came in the last week of class and said he forgot he had registered for the class. That deals with the persistence thing. It's hard to believe somebody would forget they had the class." (Edward)

Beth stated similarly that a barrier was the lack of a specific meeting time.

> "I think maybe some students might think they can get away with more because they aren't meeting in the classroom physically on a regular basis." (Beth)

Connie and Denise believed that the perception that online courses were easier than face-to-face was a barrier to learner persistence.

> "One of the biggest things I see is that they [students] think online means easy. I think they think it's self-paced. I think they think it means responding to material that's been posted to them and answering questions about it when they feel like it. They're not prepared for an online discussion format and the continuous effort that that takes. Part of it is their misconceptions going in about what the course is going to involve. I try to make that very clear in the letter I write to them at the very start that this class is not going to be less work, if anything it's going to be more work." (Connie)

> "They think it's going to be a lot easier than it's going to be." (Denise)

Denise continued to add that the level of commitment could hinder learner persistence and again reiterated that not only students, but some faculty, felt that online courses were less difficult or easier than face-to-face.

> "I've had situations where I don't think students appreciate the constant commitment they have to have. They have to be organized enough to do the assignments at a minimal level. And I think there's a perception, not only students but faculty as well, that online courses are blow off." (Denise)

In addition, both Frank and Joyce agreed that some students did not persist because the online course was actually more difficult and required more time than a face-to-face class.

> "Because it's too hard. I mean that's a pretty intense calendar they have to keep up with." (Frank)

> "I think online classes are actually more work, I think they're more work for the student and I think they're more work for the instructor. It takes more time to do everything." (Joyce)

Both Beth and Gloria indicated that work responsibilities were a barrier to persistence.

> "The student was absolutely overwhelmed with his work schedule. He's married. His wife works. Two jobs, I think. He just became overwhelmed and despite my encouragement he dropped out. I was really sorry to see it." (Beth)

> "These are registered nurses and a lot of them work in a hospital setting. Mandatory overtime sometimes comes in to play. A lot of times they work short staffed if they work 12 hour shifts. Two to three 12 hour shifts in a row, that is difficult. Fatigue becomes a real issue, but sometimes their employers don't provide the support they need." (Gloria)

Gloria also recognized that finances can be a barrier to learner persistence.

> "They drop out usually because of financial needs, because there's been a crisis in their family one way or another." (Gloria)

Both Howard and Joyce believed technology was a barrier for some students and hindered learner persistence.

> "I think the barriers certainly are that online is not for everyone. The student whose technical skills are not up there, and the fact that they have slow download speeds, they don't have rapid internet access and they have dial up access." (Howard)

> "Some of them have never had an online course before and they don't understand sort of the mechanics of an online course. They find it frustrating to learn the blackboard system for example. And to learn how to do everything with email attachments, they're just not used to doing that and they don't want to invest at that particular moment." (Joyce)

Finally, Joyce compared the online environment with the face-to-face environment and suggested that the lack of connection a student may feel in an online environment may hinder their persistence.

> "Some of them [students] get frustrated because it's not face-to-face. They can't make a connection in the same way that you can in the classroom. At the end of the class the student can't just stop up at the professor's desk and chat for a few minutes. This is the way a lot of students, particularly timid students, I think, begin to feel that they can get comfortable in the class. They can't do that online." (Joyce)

Emergent Thematic Categories: Learner Persistence

The nine specific strategies identified by the instructors as ways that they encourage learner persistence, along with the 11 barriers to learner persistence they identified, were further analyzed to see if there were any natural thematic categories that existed within the data. The three thematic categories that emerged from the collected data are: (1) Providing Individual Contact; (2) Recognizing and Accepting the Influence of Prior Learning Experiences and Misaligned Expectations; and (3) Recognizing and Accepting the Impact of External Influences.

Providing Individual Contact Providing the learner with opportunities for individual contact with the instructor emerged from the data as an important theme that describes what instructors do to encourage learner persistence. Although not all study participants insisted learners meet with the instructor individually, the study participants recognized that the learners often needed individual encouragement and reinforcement particularly if it was becoming clear that the learner was experiencing difficulty in the course. Some instructors did rely on face-to-face contact to accommodate this relationship with the learner but many of the instructors often sent numerous emails to the individual. A positive attitude and accessibility of the instructor emerged as an influence in learner persistence.

Recognizing and Accepting the Influence of Prior Learning Experiences and Misaligned Expectations A second theme that emerged from the data that instructors identified as influencing learner persistence was recognizing and accepting the influence of prior learning experiences and misaligned expectations. There was a common theme

among the participants that learners believed that the online learning format was much easier than that of the traditional face-to-face learning environment. All acknowledged that this was an incorrect assumption and that quite often the online course was much more difficult than the face-to-face course and often required much more time and effort not only on the part of the learner but often on the part of the instructor as well. There was also recognition that learners often approached the online course with similar strategies and patterns they would apply to a face-to-face class which did not often benefit the learner because of the differences between the two formats. It was cited that learners did not always recognize the level of self-discipline and lacked the necessary organization skills required of them in the online format.

Recognizing and Accepting the Impact of External Influences The third theme that emerged from the data regarding instructors' encouragement of learner persistence was recognition and acceptance of how external influences impact the experience. Outside or external influences emerged from the data as a theme influencing learner persistence. Such factors as work, family obligations, technology, and finances emerged as influencing learner persistence. It was acknowledged that these factors often created situations for the learner where continuing with the course was made much more difficult and often the learner would drop out of the course due to these outside influences.

# CHAPTER V: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

## Introduction

This chapter presents and discusses the key findings from this study and provides recommendations for application and future research. The central purpose of this study was to describe instructor's observations of the following four aspects of undergraduate online learning: (1) Learner Self-Direction; (2) Learner Reflection; (3) Learner Community; and (4) Learner Persistence. The secondary purpose of the investigation was to identify specific characteristics of the online learning experience that may assist instructors, learners, and institutions to better understand the learning experience. Most specifically, how can the online teaching and learning experience be enhanced and maximized to best meet the expectations and learning outcomes of the individuals involved in the experience?

This chapter expands on the emergent thematic categories within each area of focus outlined in Chapter IV and draws conclusions. This chapter also identifies several recommendations that can be drawn from the conclusions. Although the conclusions are reported as they relate to the four main areas of inquiry, it is important to note that there is overlap in the findings within and between areas of inquiry. This should not be interpreted as needless redundancy but as an indication of the fundamental inter-connectedness of each of the lines of inquiry and the impact one has on the other with respect to the online learning experience.

## Investigation Site Background

In order to provide additional context in which to draw conclusions as they relate to the data collected in this investigation, it is relevant to note several specific characteristics about the investigation site. The institution offers only Internet-based courses and does not offer complete degree programs online. Learners can take individual courses via the Internet but can not complete an entire degree online. It is also relevant to note that there is no centralized office or department that monitors the development of online instruction, nor provides training and development activities for either faculty or learners engaged in the process. Rather, it is a decentralized approach where any and all instructors are neither encouraged nor discouraged from offering courses online. There are few formal protocols that determine or identify what constitutes online learning at this institution other than courses are not to exceed three face-to-face meetings and it is recommended that section size not exceed 15 students. However, enrollment capacity is ultimately the decision of the academic unit offering the online section. Although 15 students per section is the norm, some academic units have allowed more than this maximum. Expanding beyond the capacity is done in order to accommodate special circumstances of the students or because the instructor is willing to make additional accommodations to address a specific capacity need of the department.

The institution does not distinguish students as "distance" students and many of the students enrolled in the online sections of courses are often residential students living on the main campus of the university. There is also no explicitly stated institutional strategy for the development of online courses and programs. The approach is organic in

nature and is driven by individual faculty member's desire to provide instruction via the Internet.

Finally, it is important to understand the role of the investigator of this study at the institution where the study was conducted. The investigator had been employed at the institution for approximately 14 years and had served in several leadership capacities. At the time of this study, the investigator was the executive director of continuing education whose primary responsibility was to extend learning opportunities to non-traditional and adult learners. Hence, the interest of the investigator in understanding the dynamic of teaching and learning online were key motivations for this investigation.

## Summary of Findings

The study participants recognized and acknowledged the critical importance of learner self-direction in online learning environments and acknowledged that without a relatively high level of self-direction, learners were less likely to be successful in the online experience. This is consistent with the view of Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung (2004) who suggest that online learning may require "greater individual responsibility" (p.70) and that it is imperative for learners to possess a certain level of self-direction in order to maximize the experience.

The data also shows that procrastination and poor organizational skills are common among learners participating in online environments. This behavior among the learners often led instructors to supply the learner with initial information and expectations. It also prompted instructors to provide further reinforcement and additional reminders to the learners.

This type of response from instructors echoes the observation Boyer (2004) makes, that the concern to provide clarity for the learners can lead to a rigid and technocratic approach to teaching and learning online, and can lead to "compliant learners". This suggests that in the attempt to encourage learner self-direction through clarity of expectations and timelines, it may actually perpetuate dependence rather than encourage learner self-direction and independence.

The study participants also recognized that the motivations of the learners enrolled in the online environment impacted their self-direction. The various motivations that the study participants identified generally fell in one of two categories. The data indicated that one category of learners who enrolled in the online courses were often residential learners who, unable to accommodate their schedule with traditional face-to-face classes, were able to add a class because of the lack of time specific constraints afforded by the online environment. One participant illustrated this type of motivation as, "[The] student [who] joins the class just because it fits with their schedule and that way they can take an extra class because they don't have to show up at that class." This type of motivation is in vast contrast to the second category of learner who, because of outside obligations such as family, work, or distance, has limited opportunities for accessing face-to-face classes and finds online learning a more viable option.

The study participants recognized and acknowledged the critical importance of learner reflection in online learning environments yet acknowledged the difficulty in being able to recognize whether a learner was actually engaging in reflective practices. However, it was evident that the study participants recognized value in providing ample opportunity for conversation and dialogue among and between the instructor and peers

and believed this practice facilitated reflection. This is consistent with the views of Habermas (1970) and others, that the exchange of beliefs and ideas with others optimizes the opportunity to compare and contrast individual beliefs with those of others. However, as Ritchi and Hoffman (1997) point out, simply posting ideas does not necessarily equate to deeply engaging with and becoming actively involved with the material and with one another. There was recognition among the participants that simply posting was not sufficient evidence of the learner's reflection and there were attempts on several levels to quantify responses by providing rubrics which outlined levels of appropriate and well thought out responses. There was also recognition by the participants that not all learners understood the relevance and benefits of reflection in learning. The participants recognized that learners were often at various stages of their cognitive development.

One particularly beneficial aspect of online learning environments was the necessity for and the process of writing with respect to learner reflection. This fundamental means of communication in the online learning environment, the use of written communication, forced learners to explicitly state reactions and ideas. Depending upon the expectation of the instructor and the learning activity, the learners were forced to reflect on their responses more carefully, rather than spontaneously, react. Many of the participants believed that this process encouraged deeper, more critical analysis of concepts and ideas. Through this, the study participants acknowledged the power of writing in the online environments. Not only was the instructor able to track the responses of learners over time, writing also provided the opportunity for learners to visibly view and track their own learning over time. Aside from the identified benefits of

writing, instructors were very conscious of the time and energy required for both student and instructor when writing activities were used in online environments. However, it was also evident that although the study participants acknowledged the benefits of writing on line, it was also evident that writing also carried a burden for both instructor and the student in terms of the amount of time required to thoughtfully engage in the process.

The importance of the participation by the instructor of the online class emerged as an important aspect to encouraging learner community. However, the quality of the interaction was of utmost importance. The study participants recognized the need for the learner to know that the instructor acknowledged the learner as an individual, highlighting the necessity of human interaction and a level of investment in the learner's overall success and learning experience.

There was also a distinction between formal communication and non-formal communication opportunities for learners to interact. In part, this was an attempt to replicate both the formal activities and the spontaneous interactions that occur in face-to-face environments. Although comments were made that suggest some learners participate in the informal online interactions, it was also acknowledged that participation in informal interactions was often the result of a learner's personal preference. Several study participants selected non-formal mechanisms that mirrored the current social practices of technology users to include blogs and chat rooms which they believed encouraged the development of the learning community.

It is interesting to note that many of the study participants stated that developing the personal connection and stressing the human aspect of the interaction was difficult without at least one face-to-face interaction. One participant commented that she needed

to "totally reexamine how to teach. I have to trust the students to choreograph a conversation that typically I'm in charge of choreographing."

It was clear from the data collected that the personal relationship that is developed between the instructor and the learner is important in encouraging learner persistence. In addition, the influence of the learner's prior learning experiences also played a significant role in how the learner approached the online experience and whether his/her expectations were aligned with the realities of online learning. It was identified that many learners approached the online experience with the expectation that the online experience would somehow be much easier than the traditional face-to-face environment.

The data described learners with little online experience as often being at a disadvantage as they had no other point of reference other than their prior learning experiences which were primarily, if not solely, in face-to-face formats. This is consistent with Richardson's and Newberry's (2006) view that those learners who were more familiar with the online environment were more likely to develop the necessary strategies for success.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The experience of teaching and learning online is a personal and complex dynamic which is influenced by a number of factors. However, the views of the study participants serve to underscore several conclusions that should be considered before, during, and after participation in the online environment. This section presents several conclusions that are drawn from the data of the study. As each conclusion is presented and described, recommendations drawn from the conclusion are also presented.

Learner Motivation Is Central To Self Direction In Online Learning

The learner must recognize and reflect on his/her motivations and expectations for taking the online experience. Clarification of expectations, coupled with the importance of learner motivation, appear to be extremely important in encouraging learner self-direction. As a result, it is clear that the learner himself/herself must identify his/her own expectations and motivations rather than relying on the instructor of the online environment to make this determination. By insisting that the learner acknowledge personal expectations and motivations there is not only a stronger likelihood the learner will take responsibility for his/her own learning but the exercise will assist the learner in developing a more realistic view of the commitment and demand of the experience. Furthermore, by acknowledging these expectations and motivations, the likelihood of aligning them more closely with the instructor's expectations is improved. This is supported by Boyer's (2004) observations that although the instructor plays a critical role in the online learning process by way of facilitation, the learner must also become involved by guiding the direction of the experience.

Based on this conclusion, several recommendations are suggested. Instructors of online learning need to consider how to develop strategies and techniques that encourage the learner to identify and carefully reflect on his/her motivations and expectations of the online class. This then allows the learner to best align these expectations with the reality of the course and provides the learner more control to adjust and/or clarify expectations. This encouragement from the instructor assists the learner to recognize the level of commitment he/she brings to the experience and the implications these motivations have on the success of their individual learning experience.

The Learner And The Instructor Must Develop Shared Expectations And Learning Objectives

The learner and the instructor must develop shared expectations and learning objectives. The expectations of both the instructor and the learner must be aligned in order to facilitate a successful experience. It is clear that instructors and learners often approach the online learning experience from varied perspectives and with varied expectations about the success and outcome of the course. As a result, the instructor holds specific expectations and assumptions which often may not be aligned with the expectations and assumptions held by the learners. By not addressing the potential differences and misalignment of expectations the instructor is solely responsible for directing the learning experience. The learner, in turn, is denied control and relinquishes responsibility in the learning process. By denying the learner some control in the process, not only does the learner relinquish responsibility, the learner is more likely to become a passive, rather than active, participant in the experience. Several authors and educators, including Friere (1970), Habermas (1970), and Schon (1983) reject this notion of positioning the learner as a passive recipient of information. Furthermore, misaligned expectations can lead to frustration for both the instructor and learners and, most importantly, endorses the learner's passive role in the process.

In addition to instructors clearly and explicitly outlining expectations, it is recommended that instructors encourage the learner to reflect on his/her own expectations. Most importantly, the instructor must recognize the possibility of misaligned expectations and encourage and engage in an honest and open discussion about aligning expectations. This suggests a level of willingness on the part of the

instructor to relinquish some control over the process, and a willingness to be open to the development of an alternative view based on the combined expectations of both the instructor and the learner.

Clarifying The Demands Of Online Learning Environments Is Critical To Learner Persistence

Outlining and clarifying to the learner the demands of online learning environments is critical to learner persistence. Often an inaccurate impression of the demand of the online environment can lead the learner to dissatisfaction and disengagement from the learning experience. A more realistic understanding of the demands of online learning is critical. Although the influences of external factors is consistent with Tinto's ( 1987) model of persistence, it is evident from the data collected in this study, few instructors encourage learners to consider the external factors influencing the experience which include family responsibilities, work, and personal obligations.

It is recommended that instructors provide learners with an orientation to the experience before enrolling in the online course. The content of the orientation must be expanded to include issues of personal and outside influences on the experience and must go beyond the generally accepted overview of technology needs. There is little doubt that learners must have the appropriate technology hardware and software as well as the technology skills necessary to accommodate this mode of delivery. However, an orientation should be broadened to include the learner's reflection and acknowledgement of personal learning preferences, skills, and attitudes necessary for the online experience.

In addition the orientation should include reflection and acknowledgement of the necessary social support required for a successful experience to include family, employers, and peers.

Online learning opportunities may better accommodate the learners and the instructors if institutions were to distinguish the types of learners interested in participating in online learning environments. It was evident in the data from this study that some similarities and commonalities of learners was beneficial. This is not to suggest exclusivity in learning opportunities but to encourage a thoughtful discussion of the differences between residential students enrolled in online courses compared to those learners enrolled because of situational necessity.

The Learner Must Identify And Articulate The Level And Type Of Guidance That Is Needed And Expected

It is important for the learner to identify and articulate the level and type of guidance he/she needs and expects. The learner must reflect on his/her own level of self-direction and determine for himself/herself the level and type of guidance they need and have an opportunity to articulate this to the instructor. This is not to say that the learner will be completely conscious of what is needed or required but it will provide the necessary opportunity to reflect in order to gain a stronger understanding of himself or herself as a learner. This greater understanding of self will enable to learner to better seek the personal and individual strategies they require to be successful and self-directed learners.

Consistent with this conclusion, instructors must develop ways learners can be encouraged to reflect on their own self-direction. This can be done in a variety of ways and can be supported by way of learning contracts and scaffolds that the learner and instructor, working together, can create based on the individual learner's needs.

The Instructor Must Recognize Individual Learner Characteristics

The role of individual learner characteristics, as an influence on instruction in the online experience, must extend beyond demographic characteristics to include cognitive development and learner capacity. Instructors must recognize and acknowledge the cognitive level of development and learning capacity of the learner. It must be understood that not all learners are at identical cognitive development levels and stages. The instructor must recognize this in order to facilitate an environment that best meets the developmental needs of the learners and enables and encourages them to develop appropriate and effective strategies for success.

In order to best prepare instructors to develop the necessary skills and understanding to assist and encourage the learner, instructors must be trained in developmental and cognitive development of college and adult learners. In general, instructors competencies lie with their discipline and the connections that exist between student and adult development theories and practices are limited. If instructors gain the necessary understanding of how individuals learn, the instructor will be able to modify activities, techniques and strategies in the online environment.

The constructs of student development theory may be viewed as applicable outside of the formal experience and primarily relegated to student life activities. These

theories and constructs should be embraced by instructors of online learning and used to maximize activities and the design of the course encouraging all to recognize individual learner's stages and encourage growth through reflective practice.

The Instructor Must Recognize The Value Of Writing In The Online Experience

There is a need for instructors to recognize and maximize the multiple benefits of the writing process in the online experience. Most apparent is the opportunity to build upon the writing process as a means of encouraging learners to become more conscious of their beliefs and ideas. More integration and expansion of the theories and techniques of the writing process must be incorporated into the online learning design as well as integrated into the training and orientation efforts for both instructors and learners is recommended.

Learners Must Sense The Personal Aspect Of The Online Environment

The need to create an environment, which is personal and attentive to the learners, is also apparent in the data presented in this study. The quality of the online experience is linked to the human interactions present in the experience. Without this personal attention and interaction, both instructor and learner can feel isolated and disconnected.

There Must Be A Reduction Of Online Instructor Dependence On Face-To-Face Teaching Techniques

There is a level of dependence on techniques used in face-to-face environments by instructors and learners. The need to reconstruct or mimic the climate of the face-to-face environment is apparent. This transference and attempt to mirror face-to-face instructional techniques and learning strategies may not be effective or sufficient in online learning environments. Although this is a natural response, given face-to-face instruction is the reference point for most instructors, it is important to acknowledge that online instruction is not face-to-face instruction. It requires new and innovative strategies for community development. This seeming dependence on face-to-face techniques also suggests that instructors may hold some assumptions about the characteristics of the learners enrolled in their online courses that may be in direct conflict with the motivations and expectations of the learners. Furthermore, the desire to host face-to-face meetings with the online learners suggests a level of control instructors may be unwilling to relinquish to the learner.

With the rate of technological development and the use and dependence of technology of current learner populations, relying on conventional face-to-face practices does not necessarily keep pace with more innovative approaches being used by individuals to maintain and develop community in an online environment. Furthermore, the paradigm of community in higher education may need to be examined more closely to determine what online learners perceive as an appropriate and engaged community, rather than relying on the instructor to direct and orchestrate the environment. Understanding

and exploring the social dynamics of current practices outside the classroom could greatly impact and influence community building in the online "classroom".

Online Instructors Can Benefit From Exchange And Dialogue With Other Online Instructors

It is apparent from this study that online instructors would benefit from exchange and dialogue with other instructors of online learning. It is also evident that instructors share similar realities as the learner. Although instructors often found the flexibility and convenience of teaching online appealing, the challenges of working in isolation were also evident. It was clear that instructors rarely communicated with one another about the opportunities and challenges that exist in online learning environments. The need for more dialogue and community building among and between the instructors of online learning was clearly discernable. Implementation of both formal and informal opportunities for exchange of ideas and discourse among the instructors is highly desirable. It is important that institutions provide orientations for instructors addressing the logistical, personal, and social aspects of teaching and learning online.

Instructors Often Have Different Understandings Of Important Online Concepts

Although every attempt was made to clarify the definitions used in this study, the participants often viewed these definitions subjectively and it was clear that understandings differed from instructor to instructor. This reinforces the personal subjectivity and complexity of the exploration of attributes and characteristics of teaching and learning. Although the operational definitions of teaching and learning online are

often viewed differently by individuals and determined by situational and personal point of view, the opportunity for engaging in dialogue and discourse about the meaning and importance of terminology associated with teaching and learning online is palpable.

Recommendations for Instructors of Online Environments

Although motivation is a factor in face-to-face learning environments, the motivation for participating in an online learning environment is largely driven by convenience and flexibility. This motivation, although valid, has several dimensions that are not always considered. Instructors must assist the learner in recognizing how motivations can impact the learning experience. This can be accomplished in a variety of ways to include explicitly asking the student why he/she has enrolled in the online course. However, insisting on an answer that must be shared with others in the group is unlikely to result in an honest examination and reflection by the student. Journal writing or reflection papers are tools that should be considered. Although not all students are likely to honestly reflect on their motivations, what is gained is that the learner has become cognizant of the connection between their motivation and their success as an online learner.

Another similar factor that is critical to the success of the learning experience is determining and identifying the learner's expectations. One dimension of convenience and flexibility implies that online learning may be a less difficult option for the learner in terms of the level of commitment required. This expectation, in addition to other expectations and beliefs about the rigor of online learner, encourages the learner to make assumptions that lead to a disengaged approach to the experience. Again, the importance of explicitly designing practices and activities through journal writing or reflective

activities must be underscored if the learner is to engage in and understand his/her role in the success of the experience.

Furthermore, instructors must ask themselves about their own motivations for teaching online. Instructors share similar benefits and challenges as the learner in an online environment. A critical and honest reflection of motivations and expectations is also essential for the instructor if he/she is to maximize the teaching and learning experience.

Instructors must also recognize the necessity and the opportunity to develop shared learning objectives with the learners. Although the instructor is the content expert, each individual has a unique strategy for processing and evaluating information. Although potentially cumbersome, jointly developing learning contracts with the learner can greatly enhance the learner's commitment to the experience. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, developing learning contracts opens the possibility for the learner to have input into how they will engage in the process. It allows the learner to develop a plan which is suitable to their needs and expectations. Allowing the learner a level of control requires the instructor to be comfortable with a learning experience that emerges rather than meets a prescribed design. The benefits of allowing learners a level of control over the experience can also be applied to online discussions. Rather than assigning students a series of questions and comments to respond to, the use of case studies and simulations would encourage interconnectivity of thought and analysis.

Recommendations for Institutional Policy

Institutions must integrate student learning theory and adult learning theory into the development of online practices. All individuals have unique cognitive levels of development which can not be ignored. One developmental characteristic of traditional aged students is the duality in which they view the world (Baxter-Magolda, 1992). Traditional aged students are more likely to see an issue from only one dimension, while adult learners (over 25 years of age) often rely on their experiences to understand the complexity of an issue (Knowles, 1975). This is relevant to instructors of online courses as they design activities, particularly as they attempt to encourage the learner to critically engage in discussions online. Without understanding the cognitive level of development of the learners, instructors may have unrealistic expectations of the learners both as individuals and as a collective group.

Student affairs and student development divisions within institutions are often separated and alienated from the academic affairs divisions. This separation does not allow for the integration of knowledge of content and experience into the process of learning. Institutional leaders must acknowledge and support the relationship between the two. Although this has not been common practice in higher education, joint research and publications between student affairs and the academic divisions of the institution would highlight the strong interrelated dimensions and the combined contributions each makes to student learning.

Most importantly, institutions must consider the purpose for pursuing online programming. Often the institution responds to demands for online programming or programming delivered via technology without carefully considering the implications to

the learning experience. Institutions must determine their target audience for online programming. Is the institution reaching out to the residential student who has difficulty scheduling a full compliment of classes? Is the institution providing opportunities to students who wish to take an additional class but whose schedule will exceed the traditional scheduling block? On the other hand, is the institution seeking to attract new students and provide opportunities to individuals who have limited access to higher education because of geographic or commitment constraints? Both models and audiences provide institutions with tangible and intangible benefits. Providing these opportunities to residential students provides increased tuition revenue and improved time to graduation rates. Providing these opportunities to new students with geographic constraints also provides increased tuition revenue without impacting the physical infrastructure of the institution. However, trying to meet the needs and expectations of both audiences can tax the structure and can undermine quality. Identifying the intent and audience of the online program provides a more stable environment to develop the necessary teaching and learning tools and support for the online instructor and learner. Identifying the intent and audience enables the institution to clearly identify the benefits, challenges, and the demands that may be placed on systems and structures.

Finally, institutions must recognize that in order to develop a quality online program, a commitment to the instructors and the students must be present. It has been noted throughout this discussion that online teaching and learning requires time and energy, particularly on the part of the instructor. Class size must be examined to determine what is feasible and equitable to the instructor as well as what is in the best interest of the learner. Along with this, institutions must consider the economic

feasibility of the endeavor. Small class capacities may be more suitable to the individual learner's needs, the instructor's abilities, and the development of community; small class capacity may also stretch the resources of the institution.

## Recommendations for Future Study

This investigation was an exploration of four specific areas of focus relating to instructor's views of learners in online education. This study yielded a rich set of data from which a clearer understanding of the challenges facing the online instructor has emerged. Further identification of additional areas of focus relevant to the teaching and learning experience need to be explored and examined. An examination of how writing impacts learning online as well as examination of how writing can be maximized in the online learning environment. In addition, examining institutions with varying levels of organizational development and maturity in the online environment would shed light on differences that may exist between institutions, particularly those with centralized and decentralized approaches to online instruction. Further exploration of learner motivations as indicators of success in online environments, as well as an exploration of instructor motivations, may also provide opportunity to enhance orientation programs for both instructors and learners. With this, there is opportunity to draw distinctions between specific characteristics of learners by age, gender, and grade level. Finally, and most importantly, if the experience of teaching and learning online is to be enhanced and maximized it is important to allow the perspectives and views of the learners to emerge in addition to those of the instructors.

# Appendices

Appendix A

***Interview Guide:***

Key Informant: Online Instructor

Background:

- Gender
- How long have you been teaching at the university level?
- How many courses have you taught online over the past 3 years?
- What were some of the reasons why you decided to teach online?

**Inquiry Area 1 - Instructor Views of Learner Self-Direction in Online Learning**

*The first set of questions that I will be asking deals with the concept of learner self-direction in an online course. In other words, the extent to which a learner accepts some level of responsibility for their own learning."*

**Inquiry Question 1.1** How do instructors encourage learner self-direction?

**Probing Question 1.1.1** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage learners to be self-directed? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 1.1.2** How important do you feel it is for the instructor to encourage learners to be self-directed in an online course? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 1.1.3** Do you encourage learners to be self-directed in your own online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you encourage learners to be self-directed?

**Probing Question 1.1.4** Are you able to assess whether a learner is engaging in self-directed learning in your own online courses?

If "No", please explain

If "Yes", how do you assess whether a learner is engaging in self-directed learning?

**Inquiry Question 1.2** What self-directed learning strategies have instructors seen used in the online environment that are effective?

**Probing Question 1.2.1** Have you seen or participated in any online courses where the ***instructor*** effectively encourages learners to engage in self-directed learning? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Probing Question 1.2.2** Have you seen an effective self-directed learning strategy that a ***learner*** has created and used in an online course? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Inquiry Question 1.3** What are the barriers that inhibit learner self-direction?

**Probing Question 1.3.1** What do you see as the major barriers that may limit or inhibit self-directed learning in the online learning environment?

## Inquiry Area 2 – Instructor Views of Learner Reflection in Online Learning

*The next set of questions that I will be asking deals with the concept of learner reflection – the process by which the learner draws meaning from what is being taught."*

**Inquiry Question 2.1** How do instructors encourage reflection?

**Probing Question 2.1.1** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage reflection ? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.2** How important do you feel it is for the instructor to encourage reflection in an online course? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.3** Do you encourage reflection in your online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you encourage reflection?

*"This next set of questions deals with two different types of reflection that a learner may be involved with during an online course. The first type of reflection is concerned with the learner reflecting on the **content** of the course. The second type of reflection is concerned with the learner reflecting on **his/her own learning process**."*

**Probing Question 2.1.4** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage the learner to reflect on the content of the course? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.5** How important do you feel it is for the instructor of an online course to encourage the learner to reflect on the content of the course? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.6** Do you encourage learners to reflect on the content of your online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you do you encourage learners to reflect on the on content?

**Probing Question 2.1.7** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage the learner to reflect on his or her own learning process? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.8** How important do you feel it is for the instructor of an online course to encourage the learner to reflect on his or her own learning process? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 2.1.9** Do you encourage the learner to reflect on his or her own learning process in your online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you encourage the learner to reflect on his or her own learning?

**Probing Question 2.1.10** Are you able to assess whether a learner is engaging in reflection in your on line courses?

If "No", please explain

If "Yes", how do you assess whether a learner is engaging in reflection?

**Inquiry Question 2.2** What strategies that encourage reflection have instructors used in the online environment that are effective?

**Probing Question 2.2.1** Have you seen or participated in online courses where the ***instructor*** effectively encourages learners to engage in reflection on content? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Probing Question 2.2.2** Have you seen or participated in online courses where the ***instructor*** effectively encourages learners to reflect on their learning process? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Probing Question 2.2.3** Have you seen an effective reflection strategy that a ***learner*** has created and used in an online course? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Inquiry Question 2.3** What are the barriers that inhibit learner reflection?

**Probing Question 2.3.1** What do you see as the major barriers that may limit or inhibit learner reflection in the online learning environment?

**Inquiry Area 3 - Instructor Views of Learner Community in Online Learning**

*"The next set of questions deals with the concept of a '**community of learners**' – the situation that can occur in an online course when the learners begin to bond to each other and work in a collective fashion."*

**Inquiry Question 3.1** How do instructors encourage learner community?

**Probing Question 3.1.1** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage learner community? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 3.1.2** How important do you feel it is for the instructor to encourage learner community? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 3.1.3** Do you encourage learner community in your own online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you encourage learner community?

**Probing Question 3.1.4** Are you able to assess whether learners are engaging in a learner community in your own online courses?

If "No", please explain

If "Yes", how do you assess whether a learner is engaging in a learner community?

**Inquiry Question 3.2** What effective strategies that encourage learner community have instructors used in an online environment?

**Probing Question 3.2.1** Have you seen or participated in any online courses where the ***instructor*** effectively encourages learner community? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Probing Question 3.2.2** Have you seen an effective strategy that a ***learner*** or ***learners*** have created and used that encourage learner community in an online course? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Inquiry Question 3.3** What are the barriers that inhibit learner community?

**Probing Question 3.3.1** What do you see as the major barriers that may limit or inhibit the development of learner community in the online learning environment?

**Inquiry Area 4 - Instructor Views of Learner Persistence in Online Learning**

*"The next set of questions deals with the concept of 'learner persistence' – the desire of the learner to continue with an online course rather than dropping out."*

**Inquiry Question 4.1** How do instructors encourage learner persistence?

**Probing Question 4.1.1** Do you feel it is possible for the instructor of an online course to encourage learner persistence? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 4.1.2** How important do you feel it is for the instructor of an online course to encourage learner persistence? Why do you feel that way? Please explain.

**Probing Question 4.1.3** Do you encourage learner persistence in your own online courses?

If "No", why not?

If "Yes", how do you encourage learner persistence?

**Inquiry Question 4.2** What effective learner persistence strategies have instructors used in the online environment?

**Probing Question 4.2.1** Have you seen or participated in any online courses where the ***instructor*** effectively encourages learner persistence? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Probing Question 4.2.2** Have you seen an effective strategy that a ***learner*** has created and used that encourages persistence in an online course? If "Yes", please describe what you have seen.

**Inquiry Question 4.3** What are the barriers to learner persistence?

**Probing Question 4.3.1** What do you see as the major barriers to persistence in the online learning environment?

*This concludes my set of questions relating to online learning and your views of learner self-direction, learner reflection, learner community, and learner persistence. Are there other thoughts that you have/comments that you would like to make about these topics that I have not covered?*

Appendix B

**Letter of Introduction**

Hello,

My name is Simone Jonaitis and I am a doctoral student at Michigan State University. I am currently working on my dissertation and am interested in better understanding the online learning experience in order to broaden our response to the way in which we facilitate and engage the learner.

I understand you have taught several sections of online courses and I am very interested in your input and thoughts about teaching and learning using an online format. If this is something that is of interest to you, I am hopeful you would consider participating in my research. Certainly, all participation is confidential and is in no way connected to the study site's online programming other than providing me with a field site for my research.

Again, I am most interested in your perspectives and would like to ask you to consider participation in the research. I recognize the many commitments and demands on your time yet am hopeful you will consider participating. I anticipate no more than an hour of your time and will diligently pursue a time and location for a conversation which is most convenient for you.

Please let me know whether you would be interested in assisting me in this research. I can be contacted via Email at jonaitis@gvsu.edu or by phone at 331-7356 or 791-7823.

Sincerely,

Simone Jonaitis

Appendix C

**Participant Consent Form**

Learning Online: An exploration of instructor's perspectives of learner responsibility

This research study is intended to gain an understanding of instructor's experiences working with online learners. Your thoughts and comments will assist in expanding the understanding of online learning and possible ways to broaden responses to engaging the learner in the learning process.

Should you choose to participate in this study, it is important you understand how the study will be conducted, your rights as a participant and how the information obtained will be used. It is anticipated there will be one, one hour interview where we will discuss your observations and experiences as an online instructor. I will take notes during our conversation and if given your permission, will audio-record our conversation which will then be transcribed. This will provide me with an additional account of your comments and will facilitate my overall analysis of instructor's responses. I will also be inviting interested individuals who have participated in one to one interviews to also participate in a small group discussion where I will share my observations and provide another opportunity for conversation about online learning. All notes and recorded information will be kept confidential. However, the information will be summarized and analyzed and presented as my doctoral dissertation.

From the researcher's perspective there are no known risks associated with your participation and your identity will be kept confidential. The benefits to your participation in this study may provide you an opportunity for reflection on teaching and learning online. Your participation may also contribute to expanding the overall understanding of teaching and learning in online environments by multiple stakeholders, to include learners, instructors and organizations.

Notes obtained during the interviews will not contain any of your personal identification information, will be kept in my possession in a secure location, and upon completion of the dissertation and subsequent defense, will be destroyed. You are free at any time to withdraw from the study. Your participation is completely voluntary and there is no penalty should you choose to withdraw. Your decision to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the investigation will be honored promptly and unconditionally.

It is also important to note that although I am employed by the institution where this study will be conducted, this research study has not been commissioned by the institution and the data gathered will not be used to further any institutional agenda.

If at any time you have questions about the study you may contact me at jonaitis@gvsu.edu or by phone at 616.791-7823 or 616.331-7356. Dr. Joseph Levine, my doctoral dissertation chair can also be reached should you have questions or concerns. Dr. Levine can be reached at levine@msu.edu or by phone at 517.349-6623.

In addition, if you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a participant, about the manner in which the study is conducted, or are dissatisfied at any time with any aspect of this study, please direct any comments or concerns, anonymously if you wish, to:

Michigan State University
Peter Vasilenko, Ph.D., Director of Human Research and Protections
Phone (517) 355-2180
Fax(517) 432-4503
e-mail – irb@msu.edu
202 Olds Hall, Michigan State University
East Lansing, MI 48824-1047

By completing and signing this form I agree to participate in this study and support the methods of Simone Jonaitis. I understand my rights are protected to the maximum extent allowable by law.

I, _____, agree to participate in the 2006 doctoral dissertation of instructor's perspectives of online learning conducted by Simone Jonaitis

Simone Jonaitis has my permission to audiotape this interview. Yes _____ No_____

_____ _____
Signed Date

Appendix D

**Follow up Thank You Note to Study Participants**

Dear Professor X,

I wanted to again thank you for meeting with me earlier this week. Your contributions for my study are very valuable and your time spent with me is greatly appreciated. As discussed during our conversation, I will contact you again should I need additional information or clarification.

And of course, should you like to continue the conversation or have any additional questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 331-7456 or by email at jonaitis@gvsu.edu

Thanks again for your time and valuable contributions.

Sincerely,

Simone Jonaitis

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