ABSTRACT

DISTANCE LEARNING: ADULT LEARNERS AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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The dissertation explored the perceptions of non-traditional adult learners enrolled in higher education at a distance, using computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools. Twenty-one students participated in three research modes including surveys, interviews, and journaling.

Adult Learning Theory provided the theoretical framework for the data analysis. The research found that participants were open to using new communication devices when provided clear direction on how to use the technology as well as a perceived need for its application to their coursework. Students perceived communication devices were barriers to learning when technology required more work to learn, were deemed not useful past the course, and the class was not organized to use the tools effectively. Adult learners included in my study desired strong connections with CMC tools to interact with classmates and professor.

In addition to their educational pursuits, most of these adult learners had multiple responsibilities that impacted the perceived time needed to devote for learning new communication tools. Students embraced new communication technologies that fit their needs and enabled optimal use of their time. This study shares that when adult learners understand the purpose of new communication tools, they are more likely to adapt new technology for use in the future.
DISTANCE LEARNING: ADULT LEARNERS AND
COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

BY
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DEDICATION

To Patricia G. Busboom and the late Wayne R. Busboom, for their never-ending belief in my abilities to succeed in anything I set out to accomplish.
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CHAPTER 1
DISTANCE LEARNING AND COMMUNICATION CHOICES

Introduction

Access to effective communication is an essential prerequisite to successful student learning (Barnard, Osland Paton, & Rose, 2007; Daniels & Perry, 2003; McCombs, 2003). My research addresses distance education communication needs of non-traditional adult learners.

Distance learning is defined as a technological separation of teacher and learner that frees the student from the necessity of traveling to a fixed place and time to meet educational needs (Keegan, 1995). Keegan’s definition consolidates defining elements identified by Wedemeyer, Holmberg and Peters, widely known as founders of distance education (Black, 2007; Garrison, 2000). Keegan’s six elements of distance learning are “separation of teacher and student, influence of an educational organization, use of technical media, two-way communication, possibility of occasional seminars, and participation in the most industrialized form of education” (1995, p. 7). I chose Keegan’s definition of distance education elements because it describes newer trends and concepts representing today’s process of learning in an online environment. Distance education has changed with the introduction of online learning, made possible by the advances in technology such as laptops and cell phones. The perceptions of communication methods described and experienced by the adult learners in my study will reflect Keegan’s definition of distance education elements.
While distance education has been in existence for quite some time, not all students have embraced technology-supported learning at a distance (Fallon, 2011; Kushnir, 2009; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Fallon’s study revealed that students prefer distance education because they want and require flexibility, but do not want or require interactions with peers. Kushnir’s study found students perceived that online courses had too much work attached to them, sometimes with work that was irrelevant to the subject matter. Xu and Jaggars (2011) found that the drop-out rate for online students was much higher than for face-to-face courses.

Other educators are troubled with the actual mode of delivery of distance education. Trinkle (1999) expressed concern over the inundation of online education which resulted in a loss of traditional face-to-face instruction, thereby dehumanizing the experience. Some educators, including Nissenbaum and Walker (1998), Rovai (2003), and Trinkle, believe distance learning will lower the quality of instruction and destroy special relationships instructors build with students. However, according to Lebaron and Miller (2004), innovative media and technology can fill the physical gap between students and instructors and create a sense of community among students participating in the distance learning environment. If students are comfortable in such an environment, then achieving education that is not traditional face-to-face instruction is not an issue (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

Interaction with the instructor and communication with peers within the online environment are essential to a student’s success and satisfaction with distance learning (Sorensen & Baylen, 2004). For example, distance learning communication has expanded with the use of developed technology applications such as social networks and course management systems. Productive communication between students and instructors whether it be peer-to-peer or peer-to-instructor improves education outcomes (Barnard et al., 2007). In addition, retention rates for
distance learning students are significantly higher when those students do not feel isolated and have dependable communication access to instructors and peers (Barnard et al.; Gleason, 2004).

Regardless of why a student selects learning at a distance, the structure and content need to reflect his or her learning priorities (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011). Students who learn at a distance have different perceptions of course materials from that of students in a face-to-face environment because the learning context is altered. Thus, consideration for how students interpret the materials and collaborate on projects is important for course design, along with effective communication (Yang & Cornelious, 2004).

Lack of interaction due to isolation is thought to be a main barrier for students to fully grasp and understand knowledge delivered from a distance (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). However, evolving research and technologies (Harris & Krousgrill, 2008; McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009) have made isolation less of an issue because students are able to connect with their peers and instructors through course managements systems, email, and social networks. With this in mind, technological support for collaborative efforts between students and instructors have become an essential design element for distance learning courses. Interaction and collaboration bring a sense of community to distance learners; thus, effective selection of communication tools along with educational technologies enhances the opportunity for participation (Garrison, 2009; Johnson & Brescia, 2006).

The use of technology has brought distance learning to the forefront of education because of the development and accessibility of the Internet (Guri-Rosenbilt, 2009). Entering into the twenty-first century, educators who understand the potential of learning at a distance realize that technology can enhance lessons and attract learners. Avoiding the use of technologies may alienate some students and hinder the learning process (O’Shaughnessy & Stradler, 2007); in
addition, enhancing a course with technologies could increase the learning value for students and prepare them for future endeavors in a world embracing new technology daily (Daggett, 2010).

The use of technology and a push for constructivist pedagogies are new trends for distance education (Garrison, 2009; Johnson & Brescia, 2006). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools and course structure (Heiberger & Harper, 2008) enhance learning as they help students and instructors develop a sense of community through collaborative and interactive efforts (Garrison, 2009).

Along with this trend of using technology for distance education, significant growth is also seen in enrollment of online coursework. The Instructional Technology Council (ITC Network, 2013) released findings from the 2011-2012 academic year and reported a 6.52% increase in students enrolled online (ITC Network, 2013). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES.com, 2004), reported that one reason behind the growth of distance learning is the increasing number of adult learners enrolled in higher education. According to the 2008 National Adult Student Priorities report released by Noel Levitz, Inc., students 25 years of age and older made up nearly 50% of the United States college enrollment, and 30% of those adult learners were full-time students. Thus, with the growth in the adult learner population, the potential exists for higher demand for online coursework.

Adult non-traditional learners often have multiple obligations such as full-time employment, childcare and school activities for K-12 children, or eldercare responsibilities for parents (Braintrack, 2010; Facer, 2009). As educators embrace distance learning they must begin to develop courses that meet the needs of this segment of the college student population (Projectideal, 2010).
Because adult learners have needs and experiences that are different from younger students, learning new technology can present a barrier to online coursework (Projectideal, 2010). The use of educational technologies may challenge adult learners who are not as familiar with computers as their younger counterparts who have used technology consistently throughout childhood and adolescence (Dede, Dieterle, Clarke, Ketelhut, & Nelson, 2007; O’Shaughnessy & Stradler, 2007). Thus, adult learners who are not as savvy with technology will have to learn new computer tools and skills to be successful in some online courses. These adult learners embrace new information when they understand the benefits of the acquired knowledge (Knowles, 1984). Adult learners expect purposeful instruction (Knowles, 1984), and want to understand why they are being asked to use a particular technology-based communication tool and how that tool will enhance their life after the class is complete (Pickett, 2009).

Problem Statement

This study seeks to define how non-traditional adult learners perceive distance learning communication, examine their motivation or lack thereof to use computer-mediated communication tools, and how they discern the value of such tools in the education process.

Adult non-traditional learners are defined in this study as being 30 to 50 years old, enrolled in higher education, and having at least two other priorities competing for time such as childcare, eldercare, or full- or substantial part-time employment, thereby balancing multiple obligations along with completing higher education goals. These students’ experiences with computer-mediated communication (CMCs), may be limited to performing daily tasks such as shopping or assisting with their children’s homework (Pookulangara & Koesler, 2011). This
exploration of the process students use to select a CMC tool for the distance learning environment will assist educators as they seek to improve communication, create better courses, and facilitate student satisfaction.

Participants in most studies exploring technology and adult learners are either age 50 or over (Cody, Dunn, Hoppin, & Wendt, 1999; Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2010) or are traditional college students (age 18 to 25) (Andom, 2007; Justice & Dornan, 2001). Thus, my study looks at an under-represented group; adult learners from at least thirty years old up to age 60. In addition to the age prerequisite, participants in my study were enrolled in at least two distance learning courses prior to this research and were thus able to relate their perceptions of the online learning experience.

Sprague, Stuart, and Bodary (2008) found that adult learners have the means to purchase and possess technology, but not the time to learn how to use the various applications. Learning why this segment of learners chooses some technologies but not others might help educators understand how selection of CMCs is an important consideration of distance learning course construction.

The communication tools chosen for this study are telephony, wikis, course management systems, desktop video conferencing, email, blogs, and social networks. These tools were chosen because of their established usefulness and accessibility to students without additional costs. Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy, and Shea (2007) noted that “in the digital information world, students’ personal communication and social networking primarily center on cell phones, iPods, MP3s, personal computers, text messaging, and recently, video blogging” (p. 88).

Understanding how adult learners think about technology and computer-mediated communication will enable course instructors to create an atmosphere of perceived purposeful
learning (Knowles, 1984) and may result in future distance course structure becoming more learner-centered.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore perceptions of how the use of selected distance learning communication tools influences interaction among adult learners and with this knowledge, enables selection of communication tools for distance learning classes. This study considered the computer-mediated communication needs of adult learners in distance education classes. One research question and two sub-questions guided this work:

What are non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions of using computer-mediated communication tools?

a. According to participants in this study, how do these students’ perceptions of communication influence their impressions of distance education faculty?

b. According to participants in this study, how do these students’ perceptions of communication influence their impressions of distance learning?

Theoretical Framework

I applied Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1970, 1980, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005) as the lens with which I viewed non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions of the use of computer-mediated communication tools when learning at a distance. Adult Learning Theory was used to understand the education needs of older students with life obligations and constraints in addition to formal education (Knowles, 1998). This theory was chosen to assess why adult learners chose particular communication tools for coursework in distance learning environments. When adult students understood the purpose of using computer-
mediated communication (CMC) tools and how devices might be used post-class with work or personal activities, they were more motivated to try or use the tool for coursework.

A full discussion of this theory will be found in Chapter 2.

Significance of Study

This study will contribute to the scholarship related to distance learning communication choices and add to the field of literature concerning course development for distance learning. In most distance learning courses, interaction and communication are fundamental; however, some distance learning is completed with very little interaction with participants. Thus, in my study, the goal is to understand how computer-based communication tools influence satisfaction of students when used for learning online, which computer-mediated tools are familiar to adult learners, and which of these tools they prefer for educational as well as personal communication needs. Distance learning has evolved as a popular mode of learning. The number of students who have taken an online course has more than tripled in the last ten years from one in ten learners in 2002 to nearly one-third of students in 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2012). According to Babson’s 2011 survey, as many as one-third of chief academic officers from over 2500 academic institutions feel online learning course offerings are critical to a long-term success strategy (Babson, 2012). However, many faculty members do not use a variety of communication tools to engage students or have the training to know how to engage distance learning students, leaving questions about which communication tools work best and are most comfortable for students for use for online learning (Bonk, 2004; Keeton, 2004; Kyong-Jee & Bonk, 2006).
Furthermore, depending on the course requirements and activities, students might initiate use of different communication tools when engaged in distance learning (Smith, 2007).

Researcher Positionality

Qualitative research guidelines state that the interviewer is part of the collaborative process, thus researcher positionality is inherent in the research effort (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I chose to engage in this research because of my personal and professional interests in communication, adult learners, education, and technology. I became interested in studying communication while seeking a bachelor’s degree at Eastern Illinois University, after which I spent several years selling medical devices/pharmaceuticals. However, while working in corporate sales, I realized that training held the greatest job satisfaction for me.

I returned to school and obtained a master’s degree in communication from Northern Illinois University in 2005. I enjoyed my second turn with education much more as an adult than I had when I was a young undergraduate. I became a teaching assistant at the university and later an instructor in area community colleges and other universities. I was motivated to learn about technology while studying for my master’s degree and observing younger learners who seemed to know all the navigational short-cuts for surfing the web, manipulating creative software, and using computer tools. My advisor and I discussed my interest in technology and he suggested I take a class in educational technology to see if the curriculum fit my needs. Thus, I began my doctoral work in the Department of Educational Technology, Research and Assessment; a course of study that culminates with this research.
It was while finding a balance for teaching and attending classes that I obtained insight into what it is like to be an adult learner. This was especially true when working on my master’s degree and sitting in classes with younger adult learners who had fewer responsibilities outside of school. They seemed to be able to wait until the last minute to work on papers, staying up all night the week of assignment due-dates, while I carefully monitored my time so I could accomplish my school work, teach classes, and maintain a home life with a loving, supportive husband and young son. As a student, procrastination with course assignments was never a luxury in which I could indulge because of work, education, and family competing for time. When assigned to group work, I was careful with the selection of partners/group-mates I chose for assignments. I preferred to work with a fellow student who had priorities similar to mine or who had shown previous maturity with task-related coursework.

As a communications instructor in higher education for the past eight years, and as an adult learner myself, I have interacted with and observed students using various communication tools, and that experience may have prompted certain researcher biases, including preconceived perceptions of what I would find from this research (see researcher bias section, Chapter 3). Teaching online has taught me the importance of reliable communication as I interact with students. My goal is to create a learning environment that nurtures the learning process and encourages students to proceed with educational goals.

It is for these reasons that I chose educational technology as an academic field of study and this research project in pursuit of a doctoral degree as these allowed me to explore how non-traditional adult learners react to distance learning, their motivation to use distance education communication tools, and how these students perceive the value of such tools in the education process.
Organization of Dissertation

Chapter 1 identifies some of the founders of the distance education instructional mode and how distance learning has made inroads into higher education, followed by an introduction to the importance of providing appropriate computer-mediated communication devices for distance learning. The problem statement is presented and research questions are identified. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical framework in which the research was grounded, naming Adult Learning Theory as being most applicable for this study.

The literature review in Chapter 2 provides further background into distance learning and issues with communication, and introduces how the theoretical framework, Adult Learning Theory, applies to this research.

Chapter 3 addresses the methodological approach to my research and the strategy of data collection: surveys, personal interviews, and participants’ journals. Chapter 3 describes the challenges, limitations, and inherent biases and positionality recognized by the researcher, explains the significance of the study and its contributions to the literature, and identifies the significance of the information derived from the research.

Chapter 4 explores the question about non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions when using computer-mediated communication tools such as email, course management systems, and telephony for distance learning. This chapter reviews the results of adult learners use of these specific CMC tools.

Chapter 5 examines the sub questions concerning non-traditional adult student perceptions regarding computer-mediated communication tools and how these students’
experiences might influence their impressions of faculty and distance learning. This chapter explores the results of the research findings.

Chapter 6 reviews the results and offers a conclusion and discussion of the research findings, the significance of the findings, and speculation about future research that might stem from the perceptions provided through the study.
The outcome of education, regardless of the context or delivery system, should be a positive learning experience for students (McCombs, 2003). Just because a learning environment is innovative does not mean the value of education provided in that environment cannot be held to the same high standards of traditional face-to-face instruction. In fact, face-to-face courses do use inventive ways of connecting with students (TeachThought Staff, 2012). This literature review will reflect upon studies of older students who may not have attended college immediately after high school and who made decisions about their use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools to support learning online or in a blended distance education setting.

Learning at a distance has survived many years of scrutiny from scholars and students who perceive distance education as being different from traditional face-to-face (Hassenburg, 2009; Sloan Consortium, 2013). Questions remain, however, about how students process information and/or what they are doing as they learn (Molenda & Boling, 2007).

The Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) emphasizes the importance of structuring courses which meet students’ learning needs as well as their learning styles (AECT, 2008), and this includes thoughtful preparation of educational materials suitable for distance learning coursework. The goal of an instructor who is planning a distance learning course is to adjust the course structure to provide quality instruction regardless of the
learners’ environments (Simonson, 2000). The AECT definitions committee states “Educational technology is the study and ethical practice of facilitating learning and improving performance by creating, using, and managing appropriate technological processes and resources” (Januszewski & Molenda, 2008, p. 2). This supports the notion that choosing the most appropriate technology to address students’ needs, will enhance the course content – an important goal for any instructor who is teaching a class within the distance learning setting.

By exploring and identifying effective CMC tool choices of non-traditional adult learners, educators will have information available to them to use to enhance the focus regarding communication needs of this select group of students.

Basis for Theory Selection

Several theories that may be applied when seeking a better understanding of distance learning include Independent Study (Wedemeyer, 1971), Transactional Distance Theory (Moore, 2007), Industrialization of Teaching (Peters, 1988), Interaction and Communication (Holmberg, 1985), and Equivalency Theory (Simonson, Schlosser, & Hanson, 1999). However, because the emphasis of my research lies with how adult learners perceive communication when learning at a distance, for this research I selected Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, 1962, 1975, 1984, 1998), to learn more about the choices of adult learners’ preferred CMC tools when they are engaged in collaborative efforts at a distance.

Adult non-traditional learners have priorities and experiences that may be different from those students who are attending college directly from high school, so understanding the reasoning behind communication choices will provide opportunities for advancing interactions
and collaborative efforts for the adult non-traditional student population when learning at a distance.

**Understanding Adult Learning Theory**

The search for teaching and learning theories to support adult education dates back to 1926 with the formation of the American Association for Adult Education (Knowles, 1962), and the question of whether and how adults retain the ability to learn was a research topic in the field of psychology (Thorndike, Bregman, Tilton, & Woodyard, 1928). It was not until studies focused on adult students’ abilities to learn and not how fast they were able accomplish a learning task, that researchers found adults could learn as well as younger students (Lorge, 1944, 1947). Research has expanded to include study of methods used in the classroom to enhance curriculum and course structure for adult learners (Andersson, Kopens, Larson & Milana, 2012; Galbraith, 1998). It is well established that students in different stages of life are motivated to learn differently (Donaldson, 1984; Miller & Vandome, 2009; Wood, 1998). Adult learners are a growing population of students in higher education (Hess, 2011), therefore their education needs should be explored. Thus, Adult Learning Theory is appropriate as a lens for reviewing research into the education needs and expectations of older students.

A premise of Adult Learning Theory is that adults are motivated to learn when educational opportunities build upon their previous experience. Working within an adult’s frame of reference includes understanding how that student learns and retains information presented in an educational setting. Kang (2007) reported a key finding that attempts to identify a single educational approach for adults, e.g., an experimental, situational, or transformative
environment, would exclude some learners. Because students learn and react to information differently, using more than one pedagogical approach enhances the students’ learning experience and the instructors’ teaching abilities (Kang, 2007).

Eduard Lindeman (1926), a pioneer in adult education, had five key assumptions about adult learners: 1) adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; 2) adults’ orientation to learning is life-centered; 3) experience is the richest source for adults’ learning; 4) adults have a deep need to be self-directing; and 5) individual differences among people increase with age. Lindeman’s assumptions gave support for future theorists to develop new learning theories and constituted a foundation for Adult Learning Theory (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011).

John Dewey influenced educational theories by viewing education as an individualized learning activity. Dewey, an educational philosopher, started a progressive movement in education, sometimes referred to as functionalism, by studying how children were motivated to solve problems in the classroom (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011). Dewey felt that when a student/person solved a problem within an environment, s/he formed meaning from the experience (Watras, 2012). Educators could advance students’ knowledge by building on these activities in the classroom (Dewey, 1938; Watras, 2012). Dewey also felt that organizing knowledge by using textbooks as a reference point to guide questions from students as they solved problems allowed students to use previous experience to enhance their understanding of the subject in a pragmatic manner (Dewey, 1916; Watras, 2012).

Building on the work of Eduard Lindeman (1926) and John Dewey (1938), Malcolm Knowles was inspired to advance andragogy – teaching strategies aimed at adult learners. Lindeman’s *Meaning of Adult Education* (1926) laid the foundation for systems theory, which
Knowles also used to formulate his approach to an adult learning theory that focuses on the learner’s life experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Lindeman (1926) felt that adult education is a process in which learners become aware of their significant experience and background. Knowles, who monitored the andragogy process through the administration and distribution of course materials, formulated four assumptions that are foundational to considering adult learners: self-concept, experience, readiness, and orientation to learn. Later, he added a fifth assumption – motivation to learn (Knowles, 1998).

McGrath (2009) reviewed andragogy and applications to adult learning and reported that adults are motivated to learn when they understand the purpose and meaning behind the lesson. McGrath described pedagogy as a learning environment in which a teacher lectures to students and the students learn from what they are taught. Andragogy differs from traditional pedagogy because a teacher facilitates learning, rather than teaching by delivering information and then having students assign meaning to the new knowledge by relating it to their previous life experiences (McGrath, 2009). When adults understand the reasons for learning a new concept, McGrath argued, they are more motivated to take in knowledge, thus more ready to learn.

McGrath noted that some adult learners might not be ready for andragogy-type learning, for example if the student is 18 to 25 years old and does not possess the same breadth of experiences that older counterparts might have to offer during interactive discussions. Inclusion must be present in order to allow all students to participate, no matter what the level of previous experience. McGrath also discussed the essence of organization needed for adult learners. If students are provided objectives, a clear syllabus, and perhaps even participate in planning the course, they tend to be more motivated towards the subject matter. Another issue discussed in McGrath’s review of andragogy is the fact that adults who are engaged in the learning process
enjoy education and that such motivation creates an inclusive environment (McGrath, 2009). If adult learners have a venue to share both personal and professional experiences, McGrath found, they have a sense of belonging that acts as a catalyst for developing knowledge.

In Knowles, Holton, and Swanson’s book entitled *The Adult Learner* (2011), the authors maintain that part of understanding adult students’ motivation to learn when engaged in computer-based instruction is to distinguish how they approach course assignments. The authors state that there are two types of adults engaged in computer-based learning: one who is self-directed and the other who needs more support. The self-directed learners are highly motivated and possess an internal locus of control (Knowles et al., 2011). Less-motivated students need more encouragement, feedback and constant interaction. The lower the motivation to succeed, the more dependent these students are on their environments.

Other researchers interested in adult learning have studied how adult learners interact within the learning environment. For example, Taylor, Abasi, Pinsent-Johnson, and Evans (2007) studied learners enrolled in an adult literacy program that offered formal and informal learning environments to learn how adult learners collaborated within face-to-face and distance learning. The study variables were curriculum, number of students, and instructors’ teaching styles. While this research focused on adult learners and collaboration and not distance learning, it considered learner-learner and learner-instructor interactions that apply to the traditional classroom and to distance learning environments. The investigation found that collaborative efforts among adult learners were important for developing a community of practice and that such a community provided support for adult learners whether in tutorial, small, or large groups. Factors that influenced the collaboration among students included instructor teaching style, type of assignments, and students’ abilities to learn independently (Taylor et al., 2007). The Taylor et
al. study identified factors that resulted in positive collaboration, which allowed researchers to explore how those factors could affect aspects of distance learning, including my present study that seeks to understand how the selection and use of communication tools influences learning and student satisfaction.

Adult Learning Theory was applied in my study to find meaning in the participants’ perceptions of distance learning and communication tools and how education co-exists with other activities inherent in adult learners’ lives (Knowles, 1984). A study of adult learners assumes an acknowledgement of the accumulated experiences of a person who is engaged in education (Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Adults bring unique life experiences to the classroom with their maturity from careers, families, relationships, and financial responsibilities that create a definitional need for why they are learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). Using their experience as a foundation, adults build on previous knowledge when learning (Knowles, 1984). Adults become more self-directing as they grow and mature, creating a sense of independence when approaching education (Knowles, 1970, 1980, 1984).

Adult Learning Theory grounds the expectation that adults enjoy and succeed in the education process when they realize their own strengths and capitalize on their life experiences, thereby appreciating the additional knowledge and skills they are acquiring and encouraging further learning (Parker, 2010). This enhancement of skills serves to motivate adult learners (Parker, 2010).

My experience as an adult learner and instructor has helped to build a solid foundation for applying Adult Learning Theory to support conclusions about the communication choices of the adult learners in this study. My research will guide future understanding of why adult learners prefer certain CMCs when collaborating at a distance. The participants’ reasoning
involved in making communication choices will stimulate ideas to create learner-centered
courses and distance learning activities.

Using Adult Learning Theory to ground this research creates a framework for analyzing
the perceptions of adult learners’ choices of computer-mediated communication.

History of Theorists Involved with Distance Learning

Distance learning became a viable element in education as early as 1892 when the
University of Chicago created the first college-level program for distance education by sending
educational materials to students and receiving completed assignments through the United States
Post Office Department (Hansen, 2001).

Charles A. Wedemeyer was one of the first scholars to define distance learning as an
independent means of education. Wedemeyer, known as the father of distance learning, (Moore,
2000) started a new pedagogical domain by describing distance learning as a means to receive
education independently by self-directed study or studying with a directive through a
correspondence course (Wedemeyer, 1971). Wedemeyer founded the Articulated Instructional
Media (AIM) at the University of Wisconsin, which created an integrated approach using media
for educating adult learners (Moore, 2007; Moore & Kearsley, 2005; Wedemeyer & Najem,
1969). Wedemeyer applied transactional theory to distance learning, concentrating on the
structure and content of curriculum delivery (Moore, 1973, 1983). M. G. Moore, Wedemeyer’s
research assistant at the University of Wisconsin, continued this work through graduate seminars
and developed a distance learning program at Pennsylvania State University in 1986 (Black,
2007; Moore & Thompson, 1997).
Teleconferencing was introduced in the 1920s during the World War I, but became popular in the 1990s with the introduction of broadband telecommunication services (Brey & Furht, 2000). Because broadband communication had a relatively low cost, teleconferencing was thought to solve the issue of lack of personal contact between students and instructor (Chute, Balthazar & Poston, 1990; Harasim, 1990). Additionally, scheduled activities to “meet” or collaborate online improved student outcomes when using telecommunications as the tool for interactions (Derycke, 1992; Harasim, 1990). Moreover, positive perceptions of students involved in telecommunications were a strong predictor of overall satisfaction with the course (Fulford & Zhang, 1993, 1994).

Distance learning theorist Otto Peters (2001) says distance learning is “neither new, or alien.” Peters began his research in Germany and expanded his influence to over 30 countries (Black, 2007). Furthering his thoughts about distance learning, Peters says that this type of learning uses many of the same forms and structures as traditional face-to-face education (Peters, 2001). Peters was influential with distance learning, emphasized the need for new learning theories, using six standards of learning derived from traditional pedagogical structures: learning by reading printed material, guided self-teaching, independent scientific work, learning by means of personal communications, education with the help of tapes and audiovisual media, and participating in traditional academic teaching (Peters, 2001).

Another influential scholar with distance learning is Borje Holmberg. He stated that the most effective approach to distance learning was to create a teaching-learning conversation (Holmberg, 1960). Holmberg developed his observations and theory of distance learning based on emotions and personal relations between instructor and student (Holmberg, 2007). Theories of distance learning in the twenty-first century generally do not reflect Holmberg’s approach, but
his approach might provide reasoning for why interaction within a distance learning course is important. Holmberg’s theory has six postulates: 1) feelings of a personal relation between the learning and teaching parties promote study, pleasure, and motivation; 2) such feelings can be fostered on the one hand by well-developed self-instructional material, and on the other hand by interaction 3) intellectual pleasure and study motivation are favorable to the attainment of study goals and the use of proper study processes and methods; 4) the atmosphere, language, and conventions of friendly conversation favor feelings of personal relations according to the first postulate; 5) messages given and received in conversational form are easily understood and remembered; 6) the conversation concept can be successfully applied to distance education and media available to it (Holmberg, 2007).

From these early beginnings, educators have continued to create new ways to incorporate distance learning into the curriculum (Moore, 2007). Today, distance education has become so popular because of the increased demand of busy students that over two thirds of all higher education institutions offer a form of distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2008). In 2007-08, 4.3 million higher education students enrolled in distance-learning courses (United States Department of Education, 2011). With continued growth, students have shown they desire distance learning, thus creating a need for increased courses with online learning.

Importance of Interactivity with Distance Learning

Garrison and Shale (1987) list three characteristics of effective distance learning courses: noncontiguous interaction between or amongst teacher and students, two-way communications between or amongst teacher and students, and the use of technology to mediate communication.
These characteristics are evident in Keegan’s 1995 definition: “[Distance learning is a] technological separation of teacher and learner which frees the student from the necessity of traveling to a fixed place and time to meet educational needs” (p. 741). Keegan’s definition acknowledges that technology allows students to learn at a time that is convenient for them and not at a designated time. Garrison and Shale’s definition also points to technology as being necessary for teachers and students to communicate at a distance.

Because Garrison and Shale (1987) and Keegan (1995) identify communication as an important element of education, exploring how effective interaction is achieved could lead to improved learning. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) state that the purpose of online, blended, or face-to-face education is to achieve defined learning outcomes and that communication should be viewed as an interaction that enables critical and reflective thinking. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes suggest that communication is more than simple interaction and collaboration should be scaffolded. When group interactions are used to build a foundation of knowledge, students grow a sense of community with the coursework and peers within the collaboration effort. This sense of community enables a student to become invested in the learning process, thus succeeding in online learning (Dueber & Misanchuk, 2014).

Kerns and Frey (2010) investigated the types of communication technologies most likely to be found outside the formal structure of the online class. Their research participants included campus-based and distance-learning graduate students of various ages enrolled in a library science program. Kerns and Frey found that age was an influencing factor in the preferences for communication technologies. Younger students tended to rely on mobile devices such as cellular phones, whereas older students preferred various types of web-based technologies such as email, Skype, instant messaging and social networks (Kerns & Frey, 2010). Older students’ first choice
for synchronous communication was cellular phones, but only using the verbal component (61%). However, cell phones used for verbal communication was one of the least used technologies by students aged 25 years and younger, as they preferred texting with cell phones (Kerns & Frey, 2010). Additionally, all distance learning students, regardless of age, used communication technologies outside of class more often than their campus-based counterparts (Kerns & Frey, 2010).

Whether students use CMCs for classwork discussions or not, they use technology driven tools for communication with peers (Bippus & Brooks, 2006; Brooks & Bippus, 2012). The 2006 Bippus and Brooks study found that students engaged in blended courses were more likely to initiate longer postings to discussion boards than were students working in a purely online learning environment. However, in 2012, Brooks and Bippus compared online and blended students engaged in discussion board activity and found conflicting results from those reported in the 2006 research. For example, the 2006 study found that students in online classes posted more frequently to a discussion board than students enrolled in blended classes; the 2012 study found that students in a blended environment initiated posts to a discussion board more frequently for the first course discussions (what the researchers called “conferences”), but in subsequent second and third discussions, blended student activity declined compared to the fully online students. The authors attributed these differences to several factors that remain to be studied: group size, student environment, subjectivities, and the constructive nature of classrooms. Moreover, Brooks and Bippus concluded that while comparing formats is useful, studying educational outcomes would be better served by examining for whom and to what end each administrative format is desirable.
Asynchronous online discussions have become a critical element of online learning (Putman, Ford, & Tancock, 2012). Observing the frequent use of CMC tools, Putman et al. sought to review the quality of the discussions. The authors found that when facilitators used prompts to encourage discussion or stimulate reflection among students, the ensuing discussions improved in quality and substance (Putnam et al., 2012). The authors also found that sometimes more than one prompt is needed to facilitate a positive movement in the discussion. Using personal information to create relevance for the collaborative effort was also viewed as a positive force when dealing with pessimistic participants. The exact age of the participants was not disclosed in the study, but all students were employed as teachers or had prior work experiences in education-related fields. One can therefore assume that the participants were older than the average 25-year-old college students and had life experiences to contribute to the discussions. The facilitator used specific prompts to engage students in sharing examples from their lives or adding to an existing posting to scaffold the discussions (Putnam et al., 2012).

Exchanging information both personally and for academic needs with online discussions can help students apply what they already know to the new subject being studied (Ducharme-Hansen & Dupin-Bryant, 2005; Dueber & Misanchuk, 2014). Thus, interaction and collaboration have been shown to improve student attitudes towards learning, hence creating a positive educational experience (McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009). McBrien et al. studied students’ perceptions of synchronous discussions through the platform Elluminate Live™. Students who participated in the study reported a positive experience because they were able to see each other and chat in real time. Researchers found students were more apt to use critical thinking skills when interacting and shy students seemed less inhibited about participating aloud when using the technology. McBrien et al. also found that some students expressed feelings of
being overwhelmed when encountering more than one option of technology. Some students felt that having too many choices caused loss of learning content because of multiple tasking exercises. Most students expressed that they participated more with synchronous discussions, but there was also a small segment of students who reported feeling isolated because of technology glitches (McBrien et al., 2009). Though convenience is important to students, McBrien et al. found that students placed greater value on quality, expressed as a desire for clear instructions and structure for online coursework.

Rhode (2009) explored preferences of adult learners given online learning interactions. Participants, educational technology students, were asked which CMC tools they enjoyed and which they preferred to use for online coursework. Rhode, the instructor of the students participating in the study, found results similar to other research (e.g., Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; McBrien, Jones & Cheng, 2009) — that interactions with instructors and the structure of coursework were the most important features of distance learning. The participants also wanted more interaction with their peers, noting that online learning was challenging because of the loss of the face-to-face contact of a traditional classroom (Rhode, 2009). Rhode found that more than one type of interaction or CMC tool is preferred, however not all forms of interaction were equally valued by learners.

Beldarrain (2006) explored how fostering new technologies such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social networking into distance education assists collaboration and interaction. Beldarrain’s study of adult learners using technology was influenced by Keegan’s 1995 definition of distance learning and she found that using CMC technologies at a distance gave students a means of collaborating with peers.
Because CMC technologies can change how education is delivered, students who do not have transportation to a brick-and-mortar venue or are unable to meet at a set time are now able to achieve higher education goals (Huang, 2002). In my previous research in communication technology, I found that adult learners were able to pursue their education goals around pre-existing priorities such as family and work and were particularly fond of the flexibility available with a blended curriculum that enhanced face-to-face coursework (Lendy, 2009). Beldarrain (2006) supports this, stating, “technology is responsible for distorting the concept of distance between learner and instructor, and enabling learners to access education at any time and from any place” (p. 139). CMC tools can change the context of being alone to instant interaction with a click of a button (Anoli, Riva, & Ciceri, 2001).

New technologies have improved the quality of distance learning courses. The ability to create a sense of community is now seen as a strong factor in the success of a distance learning course (Beldarrain, 2006; McElrath & McDowell, 2008). Technology changes the roles of students and instructors as it requires interaction and collaboration among all participants. Instructors may take the role of facilitators, allowing the learners to explore materials among themselves with the instructor acting only as a guide when needed. Peer-to-peer learning and collaboration derived from teamwork enhances the sense of community and creates an optimal environment for academic achievement (Beldarrain, 2006).

Beldarrain (2006) notes that students in distance learning environments collaborate and learn from each other, improving the application of new knowledge as they perceive their peers’ understanding of the subject. Thus, distance education has the ability to be a constructivist and learner-based mode of education because of the various communication and collaborative tools that are available (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995). Furthermore, adult
students enjoy sharing their experience and adapt to environments that encourage them to gain knowledge that may be applied to their lives outside the classroom (Knowles, 1994). Like Jonassen et al., my study reviews how adult non-traditional students perceive distance learning along with the experience of utilizing various CMC tools in an online environment.

Adult Learners

Along with advances in technology, education has experienced a change in the traditional representation of the college student. Higher education is attracting larger numbers of older students who now total one quarter of newly enrolled students (Hess, 2011), and therefore have become an important constituency for academic institutions. Adult non-traditional learners in this study were thirty years old or older and had multiple priorities such as families and/or employment or financial burdens such as a mortgage, in addition to education, competing for their attention (Askham, 2008). For example, a student-participant might be a 38-year-old mother who is employed at a bakery, taking care of two children, and balancing multiple outside responsibilities such as running kids to soccer practice and buying groceries.

Askham (2008) posits that adult students use critical thinking skills in their daily activities, tend to have an understanding of life’s difficulties, and accept extra work without complaint. Adult learners often use their established support network rather than submit to a formal system, such as counseling, usually exercised by traditional students (Askham, 2008). These networks include spouses, friends, and peers who provide support and encouragement when the demands of higher education create stress. Exploring how adult learners handle and receive support when achieving higher education could lead to new understanding of how to
meet these non-traditional students’ needs (Martinez, Dimitriadis, Gómez-Sánchez, Rubia-Avi, & Marcos, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2009).

Studies have shown that adult students are open to using technology when learning at a distance. Luna and Cullen (2011) studied the use of podcasting as an instructional CMC tool for graduate nursing students. They found that adult learners (over 50% of the participants were 29 years and older), thought that podcasting enhanced learning. These adult learners multi-tasked while listening to the supplemental information that enforced their lessons. While the Luna and Cullen research was not about communication, technology was used in an innovative style to increase understanding of the academic lesson. Adult learners involved with this research desired to “make meaning” of the educational process. Moreover, Luna and Cullen defined how adult students interpret learning by differentiating pedagogy from andragogy. They explained that adult learners approach education using life experiences and reassign meaning to past activities and work when they accumulate new information that builds on that previous knowledge. Using this andragogy approach, adult learners also use a lens to decide what is important when learning and filter past and present inductions of knowledge, making the learning individualistic (Luna & Cullen, 2011). Non-traditional students entering into higher education may possess more life experience then traditional students aged 19-25, and because of this additional background, usually come with motivation to learn and the desire to assign meaning to the academic lessons studied (Luna & Cullen, 2011). Just as Knowles (1998) reported, Luna and Cullen (2011) found that adult learners are motivated to learn and create meaning from education by scaffolding new knowledge from established background experiences.
Adult learners have embraced social network technologies through popular platforms such as Facebook and Twitter (Corbett, 2009). Research has shown that adult learners resist using technology that does not apply to their world; using technologies with which they are already comfortable to develop new course features might increase course satisfaction and motivation (Harris & Krousgrill, 2008; Pickett, 2009).

Collaboration

As shared in this chapter, interaction is important to building knowledge with any form of learning, thus collaboration using interaction is vital for effective scaffolding to form a new base of knowledge (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Collaboration is defined as “an intense form of interaction that allows for effective communication as well as sharing of competence and other resources” (Melin & Persson, 1996, p. 363). Several studies have explored examples of collaboration in the field of education literacy. Jacobs (2007) found that he needed to provide detailed instructions to participants as a starting point for productive discussions. Taylor, Abasi, Pinsent-Johnson, and Evans (2007) studied functional literacy content with collaborative small groups and found that using information relevant to adult learners was a way to increase participation. Caravello, Kain, Kuchi, Macicak, and Weiss (2008), through a partnership of sociology faculty and librarians, found that assessment and balanced relationships between faculty and library were essential for success. These studies verified that distance learning communication technologies enabled efficacious interactions, and collaboration resulted in greater participation and stronger relationships.
Elluminate Live™, a web-based collaboration platform, is an example of a CMC tool of choice for course interaction (McBrien, Jones, & Cheng, 2009). Themes that emerged from the McBrien et al. data collection – dialogue, structure and student autonomy, convenience, technical issues, and pedagogical preferences – were also evident in and significant to my study. Positive associations with the CMC tool were the capacity for dialogue and frequent and convenient online discussions.

The negative outcomes revealed by the McBrien et al. (2009) study were related to hardware malfunctions. Besides the technology failure issues, students also missed the non-verbal communication found in a face-to-face classroom, though Elluminate™ offers a video-chat option that could serve to negate the missing nonverbal behaviors. Careful planning prior to the course by offering Elluminate™ included training sessions for both the faculty and students.

Because effective distance learning requires collaborative activities among participants, understanding if adults perceive collaboration differently from younger students would be of interest to distance learning educators (Li, 2009). Li explored four components necessary for knowledge building in online environments: threaded discussions, leadership, group collaboration, and individual web portfolios. Further, Scardamalia (2003) used knowledge-building principles to organize and critique students’ work through a discussion board. In her study, students learned new concepts by scaffolding information in a discussion board, building on each other’s observations and findings. Most higher education environments have course management systems available for students and instructors (e.g., Benedictine University College of DuPage, Northern Illinois University). Therefore, using a CMC tool as a course management system that is accessible to a community of students will enable learners to collaborate on projects and build knowledge. Furthermore, Muilenburg and Berge (2005) found that social
interaction is important to online learning enjoyment. Thus, interactivity within a distance education course leads to satisfaction and students become more likely to take a distance learning course again.

Many of the studies that reflect upon collaboration or interactions among students discuss the concept of building an online community. John Dewey (1959) found that when students’ education is blended with individual and society interests, the student is dependent on the community. Garrison (2007) built on Dewey’s concept and found that three elements of a community of inquiry are cognitive, social and teaching presence. Adult learners prefer to have real world experiences applied in education so that the learning makes sense and is motivational (Knowles, 2005). Thus, a community of inquiry is motivational for adult students as they are encouraged to pursue their educational goals. In the Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) study, the researchers found that interaction was not enough; building a community of inquiry was needed to achieve course satisfaction. Wang, Sierra, and Folger (2003) also found that a community of inquiry was important; therefore they encouraged planning for its presence in future course design.

Communication with Technology / CMC Tools

Social presence is an important factor for adult learners (Conrad, 2009). When adult students can choose their CMC tools, their comfort level using that technology provides them more of an opportunity to develop a social presence because they will be more actively engaged in the course (Durkee, 2009). Enhanced communication, usually found by using newer technologies, provides satisfaction for adult learners who want to pursue higher education but
have limited time to dedicate to classroom activities because of other priorities in their lives (Gaumer Erickson & Noonan, 2010). Adult learners have been found to prefer working with an online community where students share personal, meaningful knowledge through interactions with peers (Anderson, Annand, & Wark, 2005). However, Kearns and Frey (2010) found that older students are less likely to try new CMC tools and tended to use older technologies such as landlines and email, whereas younger students enjoyed text-messages and social networks.

In my study, adult learners selected CMC tools to use for classroom activities, including telephony, email, blogs, wikis, course management systems, desktop video-conferencing and social networks. These tools were chosen because of their popularity and accessibility to students without added costs. Important elements of my study are which tools the students chose, why they chose them, and how those tools fit into the course design.

**Telephony**

Telephony is used frequently by students to connect both on and off campus (Cappex.com, 2012). Fifty-three percent of college students use smart phones (phones with Internet access) and 47% have a feature that allows text messaging (Digital News Test Kitchen, 2013). Observing students and others use cell phones today is quite different from a decade ago when a bystander would have seen cell phone users holding the phone to their ear to hear and respond to callers. Today, cell phone users can send text messages, which allows the user to enter (i.e., “type”) a response to a sender rather than speaking into the phone, so the person would be seen looking at the phone, not speaking into it (O’Shaughnessy & Stradler, 2007). In the United States, the average cell phone user sends 678 text messages per month (Chen, 2012).
However, adults 45 years or older tend to make more phone calls than send text messages (Nielsen.com, 2013), and the Pew Research Internet Project found that 18-24 year olds texted more than double of their older counterparts 25-34 years old (Smith, 2011).

Rodrigo (2011) found that cell phones could be a valuable instructional resource, cautioning that texting is not the only option for these devices. Because this technology has the ability to also provide pictures, teachers need to be cognizant of not being too text-heavy and to be open to using images as instructional materials (Rodrigo, 2011). Students can also use cell phones as production as well as consumption devices, so encouraging the use of cell phones for more than talking or texting will develop a sense of the capabilities of the cell phone as a communication tool. Adult learners, because of multiple responsibilities in multiple locations, also benefit from the portability of a cell phone to support learning at any time and in any place.

Email

Email is a popular way for students to communicate with instructors or with peers because of its convenience – participants can send and receive mail whenever they want. Email (electronic mail) was invented in 1971 by Ray Tomlinson who sent a test email to himself from one computer to another in the same room (Spignesi, 2004). After the World Wide Web was introduced, email gained in popularity. Email is not, strictly speaking, a new technology but it has prevailed as newer communication technologies have been introduced, its popularity evident by the fact that almost three million emails are sent every second (Radicati, 2010). When an adult learner chooses email as his or her primary CMC tool, it demonstrates a preference for a familiar technology rather than examining new communication options.
Blogs

The history of blogs and blogging is loosely defined. There does not seem to be a clear “inventor” because the technique known as blogging emerged gradually. Notably, Dave Winer, who launched Scripting News in April 1997 (McCullagh & Broache, 2007), did not then call this CMC blogging, but a “web log.” However, Jorn Barger says he invented the word “web log” by creating RobotWisdom.com in December 1997 (McCullagh & Broache, 2007). Peter Merholz of Peterme.com abbreviated the term web log to “blog” in 1997. The word “blog” was named Merriam-Webster’s word of the year in 2004.

A blog is an online journal written by one author who updates the information periodically (Rosenberg, 2010). Blogs are used for many purposes, including press releases, organization updates, common interest groups, and for other individuals or groups that benefit from providing a centralized communication resource. The content is controlled by an organization or common author and is not accessible or editable like a wiki. There are two types of blogs: a regular blog, which has no limit on the number of characters used in an entry, or a microblog such as Twitter, which allows up to 140 characters (Java, Song, Finin, & Tseng, 2007).

Twitter is a social network microblog that is managed by individual participants (Ferguson, 2010). The networked microblog instant-messaging technology allows individuals to learn or share information and is in popular use for topics such as movie stars, current world events, or education interests (Greenhow, 2009; Java et al., 2007). Using Twitter’s microblogging service, which works over multiple networks and devices (Twitter.com, 2013a),
participants can choose the Twitter source they want to follow and receive immediate updates in real time. Twitter sends an average of 140 million tweets per day (Twitter.com, 2011).

Twitter is embraced by institutions such as the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which uses this technology to prompt interest in the space program among a large audience (Popkin, 2010). For example, NASA furthers educational interests in space among Twitter followers interested in the planet Mars. Tweets are sent out daily to followers who sign up for updates from the Mars Rovers, six-wheeled space research vehicles first launched onto the planet in 2004 (Twitter.com, 2013b).

Twitter and other blog platforms could serve as a CMC tool for adult learners with multiple responsibilities because they offer the convenience of sharing information quickly.

**Wikis**

The word “wiki” comes from the Hawaiian word for “quick” or “to hurry.” Ward Cunningham developed wikis in 1995 to support collaborative efforts to share programming languages and experiences (Leuf & Cunningham, 2001). Wikis have become Internet-based collaborative discussion board websites that allow participants to post, respond to, and modify postings of other participants (Lamb, 2004). Wikis allow for editing, criticism, praising, and building a sense of community among participants who join in the virtual conversation (Smith, 2003). Wikis themselves do not establish a sense of community; they allow the participants to develop and build a community as they interact (Lamb, 2004).

As an educational CMC, wikis support a two-step process, the first being to add content and the second to modify content. Liu (2010) found wikis to be useful collaborative tools for
students as they worked on classroom assignments. Three factors were identified to assess the students’ perceptions of the usefulness of wikis: self-efficacy, online posting anxiety, and perceived behavioral control (Liu, 2010).

Hatzipanagos and Warburton (2009) perceived wikis to have potential as assessment tools. This research looked at the use of wikis as a possible intervention method to replace formative assessments traditionally used with face-to-face environments. Findings showed that wikis created a learner-centered atmosphere for testing knowledge, thereby enhancing learning through collaboration with classmates (Hatzipanagos & Warburton, 2009).

The interactivity of wikis could provide a platform for building a sense of community among distance learners. The ability to modify and add content acts a conduit within an online community, presenting various possibilities for course design.

**Course Management Systems**

The first course management system was Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching, (PLATO), developed at the University of Illinois in 1960 by Donald Bitzer (Jackson, 2010). PLATO provided communication tools for an educational environment in which students needed to learn in different locations rather than a single face-to-face classroom.

Blackboard is one of many course management systems available for educational and corporate use today. Blackboard is a result of the insight provided by PLATO. While PLATO was a significant CMS product, Blackboard is able to serve a more universal population. Designed in 1997, Blackboard was a collaborative effort between Steven Gilfus and Dan Crane, who were developing educational-based software for institutional use, and Matthew Pittinsky
and Michael Chasen who were designing a software platform that would create a standard easy-to-use application for educators. They called the platform Blackboard Learning System (Blackboard.com, 2014). Blackboard’s single mission was “to increase the impact of education by transforming the experience” (Blackboard.com, 2014). Blackboard enhances course instruction, lessons, structure and design, and communication with face-to-face or distance learning courses (alphabetsoup.com, 2009; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009).

Course management systems, also referred to as learning management systems (LMS), are not just for traditional classwork. They can be also used for collaboration and support. At Purdue University Calumet School of Nursing, all courses are either hybrid (blended) or online (Gyurko & Ullmann, 2012). The school needed a communication system that would meet standards expected of a traditional classroom while being used by students at various locations. Because course projects required the ability to react and respond daily, the communication system was a key element for success with collaborative efforts among students. The university succeeded by using a CMS that supported communication and tutoring, included a directory for university services, and provided direct communication links for faculty to communicate at a distance (Gyurko & Ullmann, 2012). Users of the CMS services were able to receive, use, and send information quickly, creating a feeling of a brick-and-mortar environment for online students (Gyurko & Ullmann, 2012).

A course management system, if chosen as a CMC tool, could create learning outcomes similar to a face-to-face environment by providing an interactive tool for collaborative activities. Students, who have limited time to devote to coursework, whether they are involved in collaborative efforts with other students or needing to retrieve information quickly, would
benefit from using a CMS. Chou, Peng and Chang (2010) discovered that when a CMS is used in a learner-centered approach with education, students found value in the interactions.

**Desktop Video-Conferencing**

Desktop video-conferencing is a broad term that can be applied to streaming, podcasting, or video conferencing. It is communication that is accomplished through the use of interactive communication technologies that allow for two or more locations to interact via two-way video and audio transmissions simultaneously (Moody & Wieland, 2010; Simonson et al., 2009).

Streaming media technology allows the sharing of audio, video, or other multimedia over the Internet (Mainhart, Gerraughty, & Anderson, 2004). Skype is a trademarked form of streaming media technology that enables participants to have a face-to-face conversation over a distance (aboutskype.com, 2010). Skype, founded in 2003 and based in Luxembourg, is a leading Internet communications company. In the first six months of 2010, it used 88.4 billion minutes, 40% of them being video calls (aboutskype.com, 2010).

If video-conferencing were chosen as the CMC tool, students might have the benefit of both verbal and nonverbal communication with the person with whom they are collaborating on an online project. Moody and Wieland (2010) found that video conferencing helped students form a social presence in an online educational administration program and gave educators the ability to build and maintain relationships with students. Video-conferencing might prove to be a great option for adult learners because they would have the benefit of seeing peers and instructors, not just speaking to them in a linear format as they would with email or discussion boards (Idowu, 2012).
Social Networks

Social networks are websites that allow members to build their own pages; invite other users to send messages, pictures, or videos; play games; and even create businesses by collaborating with other network users (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). The first social network users were born after 1984, a population for whom the Internet has always been present (Oblinger, 2003).

One social network, Facebook, originated in a Harvard dorm room in 2004 (Carlson, 2010). The website, originally called Facemash, was used to assess if one person was more attractive than another, comparing student identification photographs without their knowledge or consent (Kaplan, 2003). The creator, Mark Zuckerberg, changed the name to Facebook after he dealt with inquiries from Harvard’s school administration (Kaplan, 2003). Because the technology has been in existence for almost 10 years, it can no longer qualify as a “trend.” (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Social networking has, however, begun to find an audience within the educational community because students already know how to access and use the communication tool (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Older generations are now also using Facebook; collectively, the average age of Facebook users is 40.5 (Pingdom, 2012). It is estimated that 500 million people have a Facebook page (BrianSolis, 2010).

West, Lewis, and Currie (2009), studied the public and private uses of Facebook and found that college students aged 21-26 wanted to keep their parents out of Facebook so they could enjoy the experience of private space. Interestingly, this same group of traditionally-aged students did not think that most of their parents would ever know how or care to use Facebook because of the lack of privacy.
In addition, because studies have shown that adults enjoy using social networks in their personal lives, they might choose to use social networks as a CMC for distance learning coursework. West et al. (2009) found social network technology blurred the separation of personal and public, rather than defining it. The question is whether learners can keep their personal and academic lives separate or if they are attracted to the convenience of using one tool for both personal and education-related communication.

Chapter Summary

As adult learners actively seek opportunities to forge ahead with education, distance learning becomes an increasingly viable option. Therefore, course satisfaction depends on whether the faculty and course designers understand how these learners prefer to interact with peers and instructors and what drives their decisions for choice of communication tools. At the same time, learners who explore their options for CMC devices will make decisions that could influence and potentially improve their academic futures. Given what the learners who participated in this research reported was important for successful distance learning communication, I hope education is focused on becoming more learner-centered. Adult learners are motivated to learn by using communication tools for education that are also useful to them in their everyday lives. By applying the research findings, my goal is to bring importance to computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools when used with an adult learner population, improving learning outcomes with this select population of students.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research methods support understanding of an individual’s behavior and the social context in which it occurs (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011; Stake, 2010). Qualitative research grounded in Adult Learning Theory was appropriate for this study’s research strategy because it is centered on why adults select computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools while learning. My research involves one question asking what non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions are of using CMC tools when engaged in distance education, and two sub-questions asking how these same learners’ perceptions of communication influence their impressions of distance learning faculty and distance learning.

My study used three types of data collection – surveys, interviews, and journaling – to explore why nontraditional students choose to use CMC tools, the reasoning behind those decisions, and why they are more comfortable using those tools to collaborate outside of class. Interpretation of the qualitative data was found by summarizing personal experiences shared by a participant, with me, the researcher. Careful attention was paid to interpretation of feelings and emotions displayed during interviews or through email correspondence when describing the participants’ answers and underlying tone. The organization and analysis of research data acknowledged that just because participants were not forthcoming, did not mean their “voice” was not found (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). This is further supported by Borland (1991) who contends that while not all interpretation can be delivered perfectly, the researcher must be
challenged to present the viewpoint of the participant and work to incorporate ideas into the research for a scholarly, balanced presentation.

My qualitative research methodology allowed exploration of the unique personal perceptions of the adult learners who participated in this research. These perceptions were explored to gather evidence for better course communication tools and delivery of instruction for learning at a distance. As Stake (2010) purports, qualitative research methods are an appropriate methodology for the examination of perceptions, feelings, and reasoning processes of study participants. Bogdan and Biklen-Knopp (2011) agree that qualitative research does not produce exact measurements or statistics, but instead strives to formulate conclusions based on perceptions or descriptions that stem from the participants’ experiences.

Participants

This study of 21 participants explored the perceptions of adult learners enrolled at community colleges or universities. When additional samples reflected no significant change in the topics found in the data research, data collection was discontinued.

The initial participants were adult students located in the western suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. Through Facebook and email, and a snowball effect sampling technique, participants were attracted from throughout the United States (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011; McMillan, 2008). Several of my former students became participants in this study and they, in turn, attracted others with similar distance education experience to participate; thus, adding participants to the data collection and value to the research (Heckathorn, 2002). The snowball
effect (or network sampling as it is sometimes known [McMillan, 2008]) was effective for this study because it benefited from the contributions of individuals who were interested in sharing their experiences with CMCs and distance education.

Participants who were former students of mine were not receiving a grade from me during this research nor were they under my supervision, therefore conflict of interest for participation was not a factor. Students who desired to continue to participate after the initial survey had the option of volunteering for journaling and/or interviews (see Appendix A) and were selected in the order in which they responded. In some instances, participants were found through other students who would contact me directly for the survey link, schedule an interview, or complete journaling. Data collection resulted in the emergence of new topics, resulting in richer content so additional interviews and journals were used to explore these new ideas brought forth by the adult students.

Some interviewees could not manage video-chat, so the interviews were conducted either face-to-face or through email, depending on the interviewees’ availability. In attempts to use video-chat, either the interview time could not be found to “meet” or when an interview was confirmed, the equipment malfunctioned. Even so, personal interviews permitted unstructured, spontaneous questions which triggered responses that enhanced the research data. Similarly, follow-up questions asked during email exchanges allowed participants to be more forthcoming than they had been with the initial questions. This follow-up activity, commonly referred to as “probing,” is appropriate when a participant answers a question that then leads to additional information that is useful to the research (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011; Stake, 2010). I used probing questions to seek clarification to responses that were not clearly stated or when the interviewee seemed stressed. For example, if a particular interviewee’s tone became defensive
when s/he felt that s/he could not answer a question correctly or well enough to assist in the research, I would ask another similar question, framed differently, in an effort to alleviate stress. Follow-up, or probing, questions seemed to relax the participants and let them respond beyond one-word answers. Such responses were encouraged so that research was tailored around the participants and how they responded to questions. I explained to interviewees that there were no incorrect answers and every comment had merit no matter the experience, a qualitative research condition that assumes that nothing is trivial and that all responses from participants are valid (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011).

Data Collection

Three data collection methods completed by 21 participants generated 16 surveys, 17 interviews, and 12 journals. Thirteen female and eight male students completed some or all forms of the data collected. The survey, the first research tool employed, invited respondents to participate in additional research with interviews and journaling until the research methods achieved a desired level of data attainment. Data realization was determined when the information gathered made sense for interpretation and after review answered the research questions (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Further participation came from volunteers (study participants) who completed the survey, interviews, or journals and seemed to enjoy the process and wanted to interview or journal again. It was determined that additional participants were not needed because information gathered was repetitive and did not add to the research (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003).
To clarify, sixteen participants responded to the survey link that was posted on Facebook or shared with individuals via the snowball effect (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011). Additional students were found through social networking either electronically or word of mouth. Nine students participated in all three forms of data collection; and one student solely participated in the journaling activity.

The research responses were collected over a twenty-four month period with the survey link posted from August 2011 through August 2013 with interviews following. Journaling was the final method conducted for my research; students completed the required journal entries over a two-week time frame.

Pseudonyms were used to protect privacy. The following names were used to identify adult students who participated in interviews and journaling: Dave, Jack, Wayne, Patty, Norma, Andy, Karen, Jay, Lori, John, Scott, Paula, Sue, Mike, Sally, Pete, Katy, Al, Larry, Marilyn and Bob.

Demographics of Participants

Criteria for the selection of participants included students 30 years old and older who were currently taking a distance learning course and who had completed at least two distance courses (see Appendix B). By selecting individuals who were clearly older than the average high school graduate, I found students with rich, real life experiences and responsibilities who wished to continue their education.

Twenty-one adult learners, 13 female (62%) and eight males (38%), participated in this study (see Figure 1).
Six of the participants (28%) were 41-50 years old, six (28%) were 36-40, seven (33%) were 30-35, and two (9%) were 51-60 (see Figure 2). There were no respondents over the age of 60.
The education level of participants varied: Two students (10%) had or were in the process of earning an associate’s degree (see Figure 3). Twelve participants (57%) had or were in the process of earning a bachelor’s degree. Seven students (33%) were attending graduate school.

Many of the participants (43%) were K-12 or post-secondary educators. Seven participants (33%) worked outside of education in occupations such as sales, merchandising, training, and web design.

Sixteen of the respondents (76%) worked full-time. Of the remaining participants, five students (24%) worked part-time and four students who worked part-time (19%) were employed by more than one employer, having at least two part-time positions (see Figure 4). The largest number of respondents (62%) worked an average of 51-60 hours a week. Six students (29%)
worked 40-50 hours per week, and two students (9%) worked over 60 hours a week (see Figure 5).

![Figure 4: Employment of participants](image)

![Figure 5: Hours worked by participants](image)
Information gathered from the survey showed eighteen students (86%) had children living in the home. Three of the eighteen (16%) had one child living at home, eleven (61%) had two children, and four students (22%) had more than three children (see Figure 6). The children of three participants (14%) were 16 to 26 years old, 17 (81%) had children 15 years old or younger, and none of the respondents had parents or other elderly relatives living in the home.

![Children at Home](image.png)

Figure 6: Children at home

In order to participate in the research, students had to have taken at least one online course or be currently enrolled in an online course. Two students (10%) had taken two or three online courses and 13 (62%) had taken four or five distance learning courses. Three participants (14%) had taken five or more online courses (see Figure 7).
Students who participated in this research reported they generally performed well in a distance learning environment. Whether it was their favorite or least favorite online course, the average grade was reported to be an A or B.

The data in Appendix C summarize the participant demographics.

Procedures

My study used a qualitative approach to examine perceptions about using communication tools at a distance in education. Qualitative researchers are after meaning because qualitative research is less defined by quantity and more concerned with the social context of the subject; the meaning behind perceptions finds value in research (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative research stresses the importance of interpretation and reflexivity regarding how the researcher provided a lens for participants in the study (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). Reflexivity is the process through which a researcher recognizes his or her own frame of reference and how it might interfere with knowledge construction (Nagy Hesse-Biber &
Leavy, 2006). Qualitative research relies on these independent perceptions described, so that these impressions might add value to understanding the topic being studied (Stake, 2010).

Qualitative researchers view the world through their study participants’ frames of reference to better understand the thought process or perspective being explored; in this case, the communication tools that adult learners choose for learning from a distance. By understanding why adults choose certain CMC tools, the study findings may augment course structure decisions made for distance education opportunities for future adult learners.

Research data was collected from surveys, interviews, and journals. This is a strategy that recommends collecting different types of information to achieve wider and deeper findings (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011; McStay, 2010). Using different types of data in itself does not ensure that bias does not occur; however McStay notes that it brings a reality to each form of data collection, reducing the possibility of researcher bias. Collecting data from different sources has become an accepted and expected form of research methodology because of the rigorous investigation data must endure to report findings (Denzin, 2010).

Internal Review Board (IRB) approval was sought and approved before the research was initiated and my institution’s regulations were followed. The participants were given a consent form (see Appendix A) with an explanation of their rights as research subjects. They were counseled that if they become uncomfortable during the interview process, they would be able to stop their contribution to the study. They also had the option to have their information deleted from the study’s content if they felt troubled about their participation after the interview, survey, and/or journal. None of the participants in this research desired to have information deleted.

Information obtained through the qualitative research process using different data sources enhanced the credibility of the findings that emerged from the participants’ answers. Identifying
common topics from three different origins provided a clear understanding of the participants’ perceptions. Coding (a categorization of descriptive data) and identification of common themes emerged from the results of the three research methods. Data analysis revealed common topics among the experiences reported by the participants, as well as previously uncovered perceptions about distance learning environments. Adult Learning Theory guided the research findings, allowing authentic data to emerge from the three different sources of collection methods.

Data Collection Procedures

Survey

The first step in the research protocol was to use a survey instrument (see Appendix D) to gather initial data from all participants. Surveys provide unique, unbiased information from a sample of the population being studied (Fowler, 2009). The data collected is standardized because the same questions are asked of each respondent (Fowler, 2009). In this study, the survey was conducted purposefully, not randomly, as all participants were adult learners whose responses would add meaningfully to this research. Providing pseudonyms for individual responses kept information collected anonymous and therefore, could not be connected to the individual student, protecting the identities of the participants. Fowler notes that the advantages to online surveys are convenience, an ability to reach more participants, lower costs, and, without the interviewer present, no unintended influence on participants’ responses.

Qualitative data collection seeks to find meaning that is independent of the volume of data, but when useful information is still forthcoming, more interviews should be conducted (Hatch, 2002). A goal of 12 surveys was set for the initial data collection. However, in order to
assure data consistency, collection was continued resulting in 16 surveys completed. Accepted research guidelines have shown that the number of participants is less important than the information obtained from the collaborative interaction supporting data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hatch, 2002). For example, in a qualitative research study led by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), 60 interviews were conducted but theme saturation was achieved after evaluation of data found in 12 interviews.

The survey for this study was created and posted through SurveyMonkey. The survey was launched on Facebook, a social website, to solicit participation. The survey, which included the consent form for participation, had a total of 23 items related to online coursework experiences and the various communication tools used for collaboration and interaction with instructors and peers (see Appendix D).

The results of the survey were downloaded into a spreadsheet for identification and analysis of common topics, some of which prompted consideration of research areas I had not anticipated such as response times from instructors being such a varied answer. This information will be discussed later within the data. The perceptions identified in the responses provided results that were used to explain adult learners’ choices of CMC tools. (The collected surveys and spreadsheets are stored post-interview for five years in a fireproof safe for possible use in future research opportunities.)

After the participants completed the surveys, volunteers were asked to participate in the interviewing and journaling data collection. Besides initial participants from the survey, additional volunteers came from word-of-mouth spread through adult students who had participated in my study through surveys, interviews, or journaling.
Individual Interviews

The second research method applied to this study was to engage in interviews either face-to-face, using the video-chat software applications Skype, or via email correspondence (see Appendices C & D). Booth (2008) used Skype as a communication tool for research conducted for the Ohio University Library. Kazmer and Xie (2008) used Skype to interview participants in a study that focused on Internet usage for distance learning and found that the use of Skype was appropriate with participants who were already comfortable using technology at a distance.

An initial goal of six interviewees and six journalers was pre-determined as an appropriate number to meet research requirements, but re-evaluated later after data collection was analyzed. The first six volunteers for each activity were selected to participate, but as more students volunteered to be interviewed, I chose to increase the number of interviews to 12 because the data collection process was rich with information. Seven of the interviewees agreed to be interviewed a second time because they were more forthcoming than other participants with descriptions regarding their experiences with distance learning. These same seven participants were comfortable in the interviewing process and enjoyed sharing their perceptions with me about distance learning. The interviews provided me an opportunity to listen to adult students as they responded to open-ended questions; thereby, I was able to garner greater attention to details related to those answered questions. According to Bogdan and Biklen-Knopp (2011) and Stake (2010), when participants offer information that diverges from the question template the interviewer acquires additional information that both enhances the data and engages the participant. This strategy resulted in gaining more information about adult learners’ perceptions of CMC tools.
Each interview lasted between 45 and 120 minutes, and an interview guide with prepared questions was used to ensure focus (see Appendix D). Longer or follow-up interviews were conducted when time permitted and when the interviewee seemed to be enjoying the process (see Appendix E). “Enjoying the process” was a measure of the interviewees’ apparent comfort level and willingness to participate. Their responses were longer and more detailed, requiring little additional probing.

Fern (1982) stated that one-on-one interviews allow subjects to feel more comfortable and less inhibited about sharing information. These same subjects might not express personal feelings in a group setting. Face-to-face interviews employing an open-ended question format can elicit clarification of perspectives. This type of interview is more personal and can allow subjects to communicate using their own words to describe their feelings about a topic (Christy, 2006).

The interviews were open-ended and semi-structured (McMillan, 2008). The questions followed the interview guides (see Appendix D and Appendix E) but offered latitude to create new questions based on the respondents’ answers and to follow where the content might lead. Not all of the interviewees engaged in this more in-depth interaction, but some of the respondents enjoyed the session and were forthcoming with information.

After obtaining permission from the participants, the interview sessions were audio taped with a digital recorder and later transcribed verbatim. An analytic approach was applied to prepare a line-by-line analysis of the transcripts to find relationships or common ideas among participants’ responses (McCracken, 1988; Owen, 1984). The data was then inserted into a grid with categories designating commonalities.
The third form of data gathered for my research was reflective journaling. A reflective journal is a means for participants to comment on events associated with the research experience (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011). Journals are research-based structures that promote sharing of emotions and experiences during the research process. Journals provide documentation intended to enhance and explain information that emerges through the study surveys and interviews (Hatch, 2002).

Journaling is a useful source of information for researchers because, as expressed by Hatch (2002), participants are the gatekeepers to data collection. It is up to the researcher to deliver an atmosphere that promotes a meaningful exchange of information free of interference by an interviewer or others (Hatch, 2002). Because a journal is personal and independent of outside influences, information obtained through the journaling could produce viewpoints not yet explored in the structured research.

For this study, six participants (those being the first six who volunteered for this activity) kept journals, writing about their distance learning experiences in an unstructured manner that encouraged candid expressions of ideas, opinions, and perceptions of distance learning experiences within an online or hybrid learning environment (see Appendix F). The participants were asked to keep a journal during two weeks of the online distance learning experience, a time frame equal to 20% of a 16-week course, providing a slice of the student experience when engaged online. Participants submitted their journals via email to the researcher and data collection was complete. Permission to use the information was included in the IRB document.
Data Analysis

In my study, a survey was the first tool used to collect information and to identify potential study participants who would participate further with more in-depth research. The survey was used to find adult learners willing to participate in interviews and journaling, the second and third tools used for data collection. From the survey data gathered, an interview guide was developed for the first and subsequent interviews, along with initial and secondary journaling guides. Due to the lack of face-to-face meetings as well as some respondents being less than forthright with some details, the need for a second wave of interviews and journals was determined. Questions that were more open-ended were disseminated to add content and value to the research. Volunteers were asked to respond with their email addresses and were contacted for further research participation.

Most participants who volunteered for interviews opted for an electronic interview with questions submitted through email, with the exception of four participants who preferred to meet face-to-face or via desk-top video conferencing. The interviews that were conducted either face-to-face or desk-top video conferencing were recorded on a digital voice recorder and then transcribed. I listened to the recordings after the initial transcription several times to be sure the transference was complete and meticulous. I also wanted to be sure to include any emotional tone that was present so the level of value was represented accurately. All of the interviews were then read and reviewed and filed by pseudonyms in a research notebook. When interviewees and journalers were open to additional questions, new conversations were transmitted asynchronously via email or follow-up face-to-face meetings. Only one participant was
unavailable for follow-up questions. Not all participants were forthcoming with information no matter the extent of probing utilized.

The information gathered was transcribed from both the interviews and journals, and the data was coded. Different color tabs were used to identify emerging participants topics. These topics are discussed by research question in Chapters 4 and 5.

Researcher Role

As the researcher, my goal was to remain neutral throughout data collection. As an adult learner myself, I felt a kinship towards the participants and wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible during the research process. I strived to maintain a friendly and approachable demeanor to encourage full participation from the subjects. I provided underlying structure through the consent form and survey questions (see Appendix A and Appendix C), interviewing guides (see Appendix D and Appendix E), and journaling entries (see Appendix F) to encourage expression of open and honest participant perceptions (Bogdan & Biklen-Knopp, 2011; Stake, 2010).

Chapter Summary

Using data collected from three different sources benefited this research because common ideas and topics could be matched across data sources and evaluated for strength and accuracy. Surveys were easily disseminated through SurveyMonkey and networking among participants. Interviews were more of a challenge because of technological difficulties and time management to identify a mutually convenient block of time to talk. Email became a mainstay for data collection because students could participate in the research at their convenience. Journaling was
the most difficult research method because students were not willing or able to handle the additional workload.

Chapter 4 will discuss the research findings regarding perceptions about the computer-mediated communication tools used by the participating students in my study.
CHAPTER 4
PERCEPTIONS ABOUT TOOLS

The purpose of this research was to study the computer-mediated communication (CMC) preferences of adult learners engaged in online or blended distance learning. The research question – what are non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions of using computer-mediated communication tools – will be addressed in this chapter. The use of these CMC tools will be discussed: telephony, email, blogs, wikis, course management systems, desktop video-conferencing, and social networks. These tools were chosen because of their popularity and accessibility to students without added costs. The students who volunteered to participate in more in-depth research with interviews and journals were asked specifically about use of these tools and what they knew about the tools, even if they were not used in their distance learning courses. If the participants used other tools than those that were asked about, they were encouraged to discuss the CMC tools they chose as part of the interviewing or journaling process.

Text-based Telephony

None of the participants used a telephone to communicate verbally with peers for class; instead they used cellular phones, a type of telephony tool, for texting and returning emails rather than verbal communication. The students expressed their preference for texting in the interviews and journaling, but only five of the respondents had used texting for coursework communication.
Convenience was cited most as the reason behind texting. One participant, Scott, stated, “Texting is much more accessible than email is. Even though email comes through my phone as well, not all other students have smart phones; texting is immediate and simpler.”

Other participants cited personal space, both theirs and the instructors, as the reason they did not text, but would nevertheless prefer this communication tool be used with both instructors and fellow students. Privacy was an issue for students when using texting for coursework. Participants were not comfortable with sharing personal contact information with other students, or asking for contact information from instructors. Participants in the study explained having issues with peers being transient and temporary because students would only connect during a single class; which brought up the rationale of why cell phone numbers would not be shared.

Karen clarified her understanding of when it was appropriate to use texting as a CMC tool for a class: “We do not text unless you have made a relationship to someone in there, then you communicate much quicker through text.”

Sue felt that texting was acceptable with instructors or peers: “The main reason I would use text is with group projects to get in touch with other people who do text.”

Students tended to use texting to communicate among peers, but not with professors. Wayne stated, “Some of the hipper professors text, but generally it’s for communicating with students about the dreaded group projects.”

Karen explained why she did not text instructors and some students:

I do not use texting too much for classes – more email. I am not sure but I think some students/instructors do not use texting because they release more into their private lives by giving out their phone number or if they just don’t use texting. I think some instructors are older and less open to new technology unless they are forced to use it for employment.
Sue agreed with the aspect of privacy management with instructors: “I think texting is too personal for most professors. I use email because it is not too personal and the professor can get back to me when it is convenient. I do not want to interrupt them.”

John agreed with the privacy issue when thinking about the use of texting with instructors:

I feel more comfortable using email with a teacher over texting. Texting seems more personal, and I think that I would be invading their privacy by sending them a text. I was surprised when my Comp 1 teacher said in class that he didn’t want 250 texts tonight about the assignment because no one was paying attention in class…. I was blown away and never would have even thought that anyone would be texting a teacher.

John was not comfortable using the CMC of texting to communicate with instructors, even when his peers felt this was appropriate. Not all students had privacy as an issue for using texting as communication for coursework. Mike expressed his reason for not using texting for class-related communication: “It’s a financial thing. I pay for my own phone so making calls is all I can do at this point. A friend of mine has shown me how to text and I like it!” Mike did not have the ability to text on his phone but he was able to try the communication tool on a peer’s phone.

Besides Mike’s more practical reasoning for not using texting for class, Norma stated her reason: “It is quicker to send out and email using a regular keyboard than it is to type up a text, especially with the little keys on a cell phone.” Interviewees and journaling respondents both reported that they enjoyed the ease of text messaging with fellow students, a common peer-to-peer use of this communication tool, but as it seems, not always for coursework.

Patty explained why she preferred email versus texting for communication with instructors:

Personally, I prefer email because it allows for sorting and or retention in searchable format, it is more secure you can lose a phone, and most professors also use and prefer email. Texting is something I do just with family, to coordinate when we are out, etc.
Also, you can’t really expect students to buy or have a cell phone. Yes, really, even in these days, many just have limited minutes.

Most students had experience using texting, but many studies cite older adults as not being open to using newer technology when they have not used or do not understand the need (Barth, Godemann, Riekmann & Stoltenberg, 2007; Merrill, 2003; Pickett, 2009). That was not the finding in my research in which adult students were open to learning new CMC tools. However, the students in my study did not want to use texting for schoolwork because most of them preferred to keep this tool for personal use and not as a coursework communication tool.

A few students in my study cited cost as an issue for texting because it was not a feature they wanted to add and pay for with their personal cellular phone bill; other students cited cost as a problem because they could not afford the “smart phones” that are popularly used for texting, therefore access for group projects could not be assumed.

Along with cost and privacy, convenience was also a factor as to why texting was not a viable option for some adult learners. Many students expressed they did not want the constant access with other students. Texting made students feel as if they had to respond immediately, unlike email that seemed to be a tool that was used when they had the time to dedicate to coursework. Ironically, several students also stated they would like texting for the same reason, that of instant access to the instructor.

Given the various reasons for why students did or did not use texting for coursework, the same was not found with email communication. Many of the students used their cell phones as the CMC tool for email. In my study, email was the most used CMC communication tool for education or social purpose with 100% of all participants using it to communicate with peers and instructors during distance learning courses.
Email

All of the participants were comfortable using email for course communication. Most students preferred email because of the dependability of the tool. John noted the advantage of email to create a record of what he was sending and receiving:

I prefer emailing over texting for anything that has to do with school or work because there is a trail. I don’t think I would have understood this without having being burned in the corporate world. Emails are used much better to cover yourself in my opinion.

Patty also had some definite thoughts as to why she desired email as her CMC tool of choice: “Personally I prefer email because (a) it allows for sorting/retention, in a searchable format; (b) it is more secure (you can lose a phone), and (c) most professors also use/prefer email.”

There were a few students who discussed why they chose to use email over texting for coursework, among them was Karen. Karen uses email frequently for distance learning coursework, but texts for her face-to-face courses. I asked her why the change in CMC tools, and she replied,

I use the email more than texting when taking an online course. I use the texting for face-to-face courses because we would text each other about class or activities also when and where to meet for study groups. I think it might be a privacy thing to ask for somebody’s phone number when you have never met them online.

Katy expressed similar misgivings:

I used email; it was stressful when the college first rolled it out. I find it sufficient for the purpose of class communication. I used email and the discussion board in Blackboard. I feel there is no need to grant access to any other more personal communication methods since class is over and there is no further communication necessary.

Katy was not alone with this thinking; Bob also preferred to email rather than text for his coursework. However, Bob had other reasons for using email over texting:
Email is more convenient for everyone. Texting makes you feel like you have to answer right away or it is considered rude. I don’t always have the time to deal with texting. Email gives you the breathing room to wait and reply when you can, around your schedule.

Along with Karen and Bob, Sally had specific reasons for her preference for email over texting, although her reasoning leaned towards her ease of use with technology. Sally provided a simple reason for why she preferred email as her CMC tool of choice: “I prefer email over text for no special reason, mostly because I’m comfortable with it.” One other participant, Katy, added to the discussion about email versus texting. Katy said that she preferred email because “it is more organized, texting not so much. I don’t respect it for professional use.”

Email was used by all participants in the study, and yet texting seemed to be the most popular form of communication utilized by most of the participants for personal aspects of their busy lives. The adult learners in my study preferred using email for coursework because they could check and send messages when it was convenient. Besides of the convenience factor, students also noted that they preferred email because it left a record. Students explained they could pull up old emails or print copies of emails to prove communication attempts. Furthermore, these same students that preferred email versus texting did so because of employment training, which they brought into the academic setting from a previous learned experience.

Blogs

My research results revealed that not many students had experiences with blogs. When I asked participants about their experiences with blogs, many did not know how a blog could be used for education; they thought blogs were only used as individual announcement sharing tools.
Since the experience was less substantial than texting or email, I had to probe deeper to obtain a clear understanding of what students knew about the tool of blogging.

To begin with, Jack reported experience with blogging for work, but described his current lack of knowledge about blogging this way: “I used a blog, but it was a very long time ago…like 10 years, and I do not remember how to use it or even what it was used for at the time.”

Mike was the second interviewee who had experience using a blog for distance learning: “Yes, I have used a blog before, I find blogs to be more opinion than fact so I did not like it for that reason. Nobody had to back up what they were stating.”

Larry had some on-the-job experience using a blog: “In an old job I had to create thousands of articles for blogs to get spidered by search engines for SEO.” Larry went on to say that he liked using the blog because it earned him money. I asked Larry what spidered and SEO meant and he explained that “spidered was how search engines picked up your content on the world wide web and SEO was an acronym for search engine optimization which involves a ranking for how well your website is visualized.” Larry went on to explain why he did not blog for class and did not want to:

I am going for a degree in software programming so I avoid most social networking because of spyware et cetera. It is bad enough to have Facebook invading my privacy, but I deal with it because of the aforementioned communicating with friends who no longer live close.

Patty also had knowledge about what a blog was and how it could be utilized. She expressed these thoughts:

Millions of people self-publish to either (a) their own website, or (b) to a blog-the only difference being that novices find it easier to use a free blog (or to have the use of someone else’s server and html tools), whereas others buy a domain name, create/maintain a website that has a more formal appearance. So a blog or website can contain originally written articles/pieces, and/or can post articles (or links to articles) written by others (aggregator) and in my opinion much of what is out there can constitute
a form of alternate media, which contains more salient information than what is available through the AP/Reuters feeds that is regurgitated through MSM. Blog owners usually control content management more tightly.

While Larry and Patty had more experience with blogs than most students, Katy had also used a blog, but not in education. Katy described her opinion about Twitter, a microblog:

I do not use Twitter for class, however for last minute changes or, for example, class cancellation, cancelled meetings, or places it could be useful. For the most part I do not use it. I have eight million other ways to communicate with people.

Lori, a journaler who used Twitter for social reasons, had a different perception of blogging:

Yes, I use Twitter but have never used it for school or work (though I am not opposed if the need might arise). I do not use it as a means of social interaction, rather I use it more as a “news stream.” I receive tweets from the sports groups/news/broadcasting groups (i.e., the Bulls for one of my sons, Pro Tennis circuit for my daughter, anything soccer for my other son). I also follow any stocks I am invested in as well as news feeds. I use Twitter in this manner as it provides a way for me to efficiently stay abreast of what is going on in areas of interest to my family, and since Twitter keeps the text short I can view a whole bunch (on any device I am looking at – computer, iPad, iPhone, etc.).

Wayne, an interviewee who had never used a blog for coursework, had a different opinion about how students were using Twitter in class and how he might use it for his career in the future:

I have used Twitter, I have never used it in classes, although I know that some did. I suspect there was some answer sharing during exams proctored by a less the observant professor as well. Remember “Ditto” from the movie Teachers? Originally I was very skeptical of Twitter, but as it grew in popularity, I saw serious implications of its popularity. Oddly enough, it is fueled by so many people’s impression that others care about what they have to say, which is probably vastly overestimated by many. I started using Twitter because so many jobs that I was applying for in broadcast media were demanding “social media expert/warrior/black belt” or other superlatives. I use it now to promo stories I’m working on to try and draw viewers to my station’s newscasts. I am about to leave that job and return to Chicago and take a job that is tangential to broadcast while I get into the door at a Chicago station, and part of my job will be to use a program called the “Tweet Deck” that monitors many, many feeds at once or news items. I am now of the opinion that Twitter, like anything else can be a giant time waster or it can be
a serious tool. I have had listeners suggest stories to me via Twitter, so as a journalist, it is a valuable tool. I am not sure I would have said that a year ago.

Scott, an interviewee, had an adamant opinion of micro-blogging and shared his perception when asked about his knowledge or use of Twitter:

There’s only a couple of things in this world I vow to never do…one, eat a burrito, two, date a stripper, and three, open a Twitter account. I don’t understand what Twitter is, how to use it and the point of it. None of my close friends have one either.

A few of the adult learners had used a blogging tool for research or work, but not necessarily for education. Some students, like Scott, did not want to try or use a blog. For the most part, the adult learners in my study did not want to learn a new tool such as a blog unless they understood how they could use it in their personal lives. Furthermore, the students who had used a blog, specifically Twitter, for non-educational purposes did not want to use that CMC for education-related communication. Interview data confirmed that, rather like texting, they preferred to reserve the use of blogs to social networking.

Wikis

Only four students who were interviewed had an accurate understanding of what a wiki was or had used a wiki. Jack compared wikis to blogging, a tool he had used as part of a distance learning course, and remarked that “with a blog the content is controlled by the initiator of the blog, whereas the wiki is open to changes – you can even edit somebody else’s work.” While four students understood wikis, most participants were able to explain their perceptions of wikis. Wikipedia® was the most frequently cited definition of a wiki and how it was used in distance learning. Wayne described his use of wikis:
I have used a wiki and I know what one is. I would describe a wiki as an online knowledgebase that is searchable, sometimes subject specific, and usually editable by users. It is not appropriate for use as a scholarly course for this reason but can be a good launching pad for locating scholarly sources.

John and Scott made similar use of Wikipedia as a link to resources:

(John) The only time that I used a wiki, if I understand this correctly, was going to Wikipedia at times to get information. I never trusted what was on the wiki page, but I did get useful information many times through links at the bottom of the Wikipedia page to legit sources.

(Scott) Even though Wikipedia is discouraged due to the fact that some of the information is by third party sources…I do find the links helpful.

Mike was proud to explain his knowledge of a wiki: “A wiki is an online encyclopedia in which people can add updates to current information complete with citations and yes, I use a wiki!” Al, a high school teacher, described his experience with wikis: “I have used a wiki. I used it as a web page to post documents for my students to view.” Patty had a clear understanding of wikis:

Wikis are different in that they involve subject-specific collaborative works, where others can contribute to development of a body of language. Wikis, thus, can obtain a sort of peer reviewed state of expertise depending on the degree to which participation is monitored. References are required and verified, and bias is controlled for. For example, on Wikipedia, if you go to subjects of a more controversial nature (use of JFK assassination as an easy example), the gatekeepers may allow reference like ‘there are several movies that promote conspiracy perspective that challenges the lone shooter theory,’ but gatekeepers may not allow information that expands on such conspiracy links, or that suggest they are true. Same would go for 9/11. On controversial subjects like this, the gatekeepers lock the pages and don’t allow changes, whereas on semi-controversial subjects, they allow edits, but delete or footnote certain entries, or include disclaimers concerning potential bias. And yet, this gatekeeping function also is a bias in itself. Wikis have a range of polices concerning contributions.

Most students who thought they could define a wiki only referred to Wikipedia as a reference source. After discussing and explaining what wikis were during interviews, participants stated they did not have opportunities to use a wiki as a communication tool within
their distance learning environments. However, a few students, as described above, had limited experience using the tool for academic research and were not adverse to trying a wiki for coursework because of their familiarity with Wikipedia.

Course Management Systems

Discussion Boards

Most of the participants in this study had used a course management system. Blackboard, a course management system, was cited in the survey as being used by 96% of all participants. Like the survey respondents, the majority of interviewees and journaling students had used Blackboard with distance learning coursework.

Many of the students had expectations about reaction time when engaged with discussion boards. Andy felt that he needed to respond daily when learning at a distance: “Several times a day I logged in and I typically posted an answer to a question correctly.” Paula described how she communicated on a daily basis: “I was constantly logging in to check if there were more updates or explanations. I would ask questions and log in to wait for answers.”

Dave had other perceptions about discussion board interactions:

I log in at least once a day if not two or three times a day. It wasn’t always about communicating with someone as much as using the library to work on assignments, answer discussion board postings, or read instructor announcements or review the instructor’s lecture material.

Dave wanted to learn from the collaboration with his peers. Dave’s expectations considered many different components of class, not just the basic one-on-one communication
expected from peers and instructors, but also feedback about assignments and discussion board exchanges. Norma had the same type of experience with discussion boards:

    My favorite communication tool has been discussion boards. It always interests me to see what other students think and what their responses will be. I had a class where at a certain time all students and the professor logged in and had a 30 minute discussion between each other.

    Only one of the participants, Patty, had experience using a course management system other than Blackboard. Patty stated that “my institution uses DL2…which, in my experience, is much better than Blackboard. A more user-friendly, accessible discussion board format than Blackboard, lots of user-customization available.” Patty had the opportunity to use D2L for both work and school. I asked Patty to explain further about D2L:

    D2L is amazing! It is headquartered in Guelph, in Ontario Canada. I drove through the town once; it is neat…it has a coffee shop done up in an Egyptian theme with amazing Egyptian statues outside. Anyway, D2L was sued by Blackboard for having stolen ideas/structure. And I think D2L settled the case because I think they did steal, but they improved on Blackboard considerably; they could because they focused their work on improving whereas Blackboard focused on R & D. University of Wisconsin, all 26 schools affiliated have D2L, the servers are located in Madison, Wisconsin. I had a problem once and it had to do with downloading videos uploaded to the drop-box and being timed out. This problem required me to interact with the head of the IT department in Milwaukee, who then had me work with the guys who maintain the D2L servers. In the end I was able to document well what was happening and they fixed it! I haven’t used Blackboard in five years, hopefully they have improved their platform since. I feel D2L is more intuitive as a tool.

    Besides Patty’s comments about possible improvements for Blackboard, other students who interviewed and journaled did have some ideas on how they would improve the tool. One of those ideas, offered by Sue, was to incorporate a text-messaging system into Blackboard: “I wish there was something that would get an immediate response, that was a school instituted method, so something like texting, but through Blackboard – especially when I need responses quick, it needs to be efficient.”
Another idea for improvement came from Lori who wanted easier uploads and embedded links added to Blackboard:

The drawbacks with Blackboard are the wikis and blogging tools. Both are rudimentary, editing tools are clunky and trying to embed a clip, animation or sound-bite is pretty impossible and so far from intuitive I think most students find it frustrating and or discouraging to use (I certainly did).

Most students liked using Blackboard for classes, however, they perceived instructors to be the problem when Blackboard became confusing or difficult to operate. Jack explained it this way:

I only used Blackboard for my online classes. Disliked that there are so many different areas you have to go to find an assignment, tests, grade book, lectures...some teachers don’t make it user friendly as it could be. Liked that I had an idea on where I was at in the class because I could view the grade-book which helps me keep on tracking on what grades I need on certain assignments/test/projects to turn my grade. Some people are not as comfortable with the computer and could have a difficult time using Blackboard.

Another student, Sally, explained why she was not fond of Blackboard:

I have had two classes online. The first class I knew what my instructor looked like because it was Psychology 2 and I had her face-to-face for Psychology 1. We only communicated by email, there was no texting or tweeting, or Facebooking. We did use Blackboard, it was my first time with Blackboard. I didn’t like having to learn it. I was already trying to learn what the class was teaching me. I didn’t want to have to learn how to learn Blackboard as well, if that makes sense? I prefer face-to-face teaching. I feel like you learn more and are more accountable for work.

Sally’s issue seemed to be with her comfort level in learning a new tool, but other students did not find the personal touch in Blackboard that they enjoyed in face-to-face coursework. According to Pete, “discussion boards seemed like artificial communication because people are not having a back and forth conversation. I couldn’t see their faces/gestures to understand the full message.” When asked to explain further, Pete said “it was difficult having to type everything I wanted to say. It felt weird because I wasn’t sure how I sounded to others in this format.” Dave had similar feelings about online communication with discussion boards.
compared to face-to-face collaboration: “When I elucidated on questions the instructor posed, it was difficult to clarify to certain classmates that had difficulty comprehending what I replied and it added an immense amount of time to make it simpler for them to comprehend.” Dave explained his perception further by comparing his experience with face-to-face coursework:

The Blackboard system was used for both my online courses. The system was very effective to communicate with the instructor and classmates, however, it became a hassle when the system was down due to outages and/or maintenance on times that were ideal for me to do my coursework. I still prefer to engage with people face-to-face or by telephone conversation instead of communicating via text, blackboard, chat rooms, etc. This is a personal preference for me since communication is such an important part of our lives because of how we grasp how an individual responds either verbally or by their body language.

The discussion board feature of the Blackboard CMS was cited frequently as being popular with participants, however, some had reservations about how instructors set up a discussion board and effective response times. John shared his perception of proper use of discussion boards through Blackboard:

In the first class I took, which was Western Civilization, literally had no communication between students and the communication with the teacher was just responding to the required number of short answer or essay questions.

It was difficult for me at first because I like lectures and getting the point of view of the teacher. In the other three online classes I have taken the discussion boards played a huge role in the class, especially as a way to demonstrate my understanding of the material. The classes with the discussion boards helped me understand the material better and as the classes went on, you could tell people who were interested in learning and would be more engaged in the class compared to the students who were just trying to do the minimum.

Karen found discussion boards to be a valuable communication tool for distance learning:

Overall I prefer the discussion boards. I liked the interaction on there and since you do not have that personal interaction like an on-campus class. It gives the class more of an interactive feel not just you and the computer.
Paula, a journaler, had some issues with her discussion board experience. Paula explained why her perception of discussion boards was not positive by sharing her day-to-day experience:

It appears to be a weekender class. Everyone jumped into the discussion board over the weekend on Friday through Sunday. I do not like waiting until the last minute to complete assignments. I hope it is not like this all time.

The deadline for posting in Paula’s class was during the weekend, and many students waited to post their comments online for other students to view. John had similar issues:

One thing I really liked about my Cultural Anthropology class was that in order to demonstrate my knowledge, I had to use the terms that I felt were most important and to write my responses as if I was an Anthropologist. This was extremely interesting to see the difference between students who actually studied compared to students who just flat out didn’t. What made this process difficult is that I had to rely on other students to post their responses, and this was an issue with every class. For instance, a discussion board would start on Monday and end the following Sunday, but if students didn’t post their answers to the questions until Saturday or Sunday then I had to wait to get the assignment done.

Timing of postings to discussion boards generated some heated comments from the interviewees. However, not all the dissatisfaction was about the timing; some students took issue with the requirements set forth by the instructor. Marilyn shared this perspective:

I had to log-in and check to see if anyone responded to my thread to respond to them in a timely manner or if someone posted their own thread can I can respond before the rest of the class responded with my opinion which most likely would be the opinion of other students (which we could not repeat, but had to write something).”

Al had similar feelings to Marilyn. He said, “discussion boards were my least favorite tool to use online because they were forced. We had to discuss one idea and then comment on two other people’s comments, sometimes it was pretty forced.”

Discussion boards are meant to stimulate interactions similar to face-to-face classrooms, allowing for every voice in the “room” to be heard (Manning & Johnson, 2011). The examples
of several of the participants suggest that when students are forced to wait for peer or instructor interactions, the communication tool is not utilized to its full potential.

John liked the Blackboard platform, but had problems with the course design and, like others, the less than timely responses to the Blackboard discussion board:

I liked the discussion boards the best in Blackboard, which was something new for me. It really forced me to get a deeper understanding of the material before I posted either an answer to one of the instructor’s questions or a response to a student’s answer to a question. What I found very interesting is how often students would put in their political views in their answers. One thing that I really liked about my cultural anthropology class, was that in order to demonstrate my knowledge, I had to use the terms that I felt were most important and to write my responses as if I was an anthropologist. This was extremely interesting see the difference between the students who actually studied compared to the students who just flat out didn’t.

Students expressed that they were comfortable using Blackboard but wished there was more consistency with how instructors used the platform. Most of the students wanted to use Blackboard for distance learning courses but they had expectations about how the class was to be conducted using the CMC tool and the rules about how peers should interact with the coursework.

Blackboard was not utilized to its potential with most of the students in this research. Blackboard has several features to use with distance learning coursework including, chat rooms, blogs, wikis, and journals (Blackboard.com, 2014). What is used for coursework depends on the contract the school has with Blackboard and what the instructor chooses for class. Most of the students who participated in my study were only exposed to the discussion board feature.
Given the increasing popularity of social networking sites (e.g., two billion people, one in every nine people on Earth, are now on Facebook [Bullas, 2011]), along with statistics that show that 61% of teachers, principals, and librarians in both K-12 and higher education are active on at least one social media space and 61% of adults regularly go online to interact on a social networking site (edWeb.net, 2010; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010; Madden, 2010), there was reason to believe that the research participants would document use of websites such as Facebook for distance learning. However, only two (8%) of the survey respondents reported using social networking in a distance learning environment. Several participants reported that they only used social networking sites, naming Facebook most frequently, for keeping in touch with friends and family:

(Jack): I do not use social networking sites as a form of communication because I find Facebook to be too “public.” My close friends and family have my direct number or personal email.

(Sue): I never use Facebook, It does not have a place in school.

(Mike): I use Facebook because I enjoy keeping in contact with family and friends. It is fun and an easy way to catch up on a lot of information in one place.

(Scott): I do use Facebook for social communication. In my opinion, it’s a pretty intimate way to communicate with your peers, meaning putting a face with a name and feeling a better sense of trust.

Patty expressed her rejection of Facebook for either social or educational purposes:

While we all know as recent news headlines support, that our use of electronic communication is all monitored, Facebook is the most pernicious such example, because those that share too much are creating a complex profile of themselves, that can leave them vulnerable in many ways, plus, it is a huge time-vacuum!

Karen reported experience using Facebook as social networking site for coursework:
I have done communication with students over Facebook in both face-to-face classes and online. Students that used Facebook used it because they checked Facebook more frequently, more often than email. With an online class, we used Facebook and Twitter for asking questions, but I thought they were a little much for this class. It should have been for a class other than math that you would like debate or just have opinions with.

Wayne had also used Facebook for distance education courses and found the communication tool to be beneficial for collaboration:

I am a Facebook user. This did not start until I got to a four-year college, however, I started because friends in college used it a lot and because the field I work in, which is broadcasting, uses Facebook extensively, and it has become a place to showcase your television and radio productions for potential employers. There were some group projects where we created a Facebook private group and used the site for group communications and for displaying works in progress and collaboration on them.

Katy expressed the most popular opinion: “I use Facebook for general non-crucial, non-intimate information. Basically, just for fun. Because it’s not private in the true sense, and well, it’s Facebook. I do not take it seriously, nor respect it as a tool for professional use.”

Students found the question of using Facebook as a tool for distance learning somewhat surprising. Many participants had not considered it for education needs. Those who had experience using a social network, specifically Facebook, for communication with a distance learning course, had mixed perceptions. Several of the students had experienced using Facebook for coursework but with a separate webpage set up specifically for the class. If this was the situation with the participants, the designated webpage seemed to be the preference because, as was expressed with texting and blogs, students wanted to keep their personal lives separate from education contexts.
Video-chat

Within the pool of research participants, I could not find anyone who had experience with any kind of video-chat for educational purposes, although I did have some participants who had thought about using video-chat. For example, Jack stated, “I have never used video-chat, but it sounds fun, especially if you could see each other face-to-face. However, it would also take away the luxury of having the online classes at a convenient time.”

Jack confirmed what Patty shared as part of her online experience when trying to set aside time for live conversation:

Many students in online classes have limited availability, which is why they choose an online class in the first place, so coordinating schedules is very problematic. I had one class where the professor tried to do something like this, wanted lots of synchronous chats, and when no time was good for everyone, he was going for a specific date. He also had many points associated with this participation, and one of the times he was considering was while I was on a plane, traveling when scheduled to present. I would have lost these points. He eventually decided to give up the idea, thankfully. I don’t mind using video-chat when points are associated and especially when it is on when where we can talk- but if there are too many participants, it would be too chaotic and hard to have a real meaningful exchange, given most technology available.

Initially all participants were willing to try video-chat when we connected online to discuss the research about distance learning. Three of the 12 participants were willing to try Skype to conduct the personal interviews. Students who had taken or were taking a distance learning course thought video-chat would be a positive online experience. One reason was because of the lack of non-verbal communication (eye contact; body language) inherent in most CMC tools. Non-verbal communication can convey stronger meaning than our verbal or written communication (McCornack, 2010). Video-chat is able to fill this void in online communication. As Wayne stated, “Most communication is non-verbal, so seeing who you are talking to is actually a big help in understanding the material.” Pete agreed with Wayne and
shared how he felt when using video-chat: “My favorite communication tool was probably video-chat, though I never personally felt comfortable using it in everyday life. I like the ability to see a person’s face – you get the whole message that way.”

Students wanted video communication available to them, not because they wanted to interact with peers or the professor, but because they thought it would be a great tool to have as a resource to see the instructor and learn visually. Several of the adult learners in my study shared thoughts of wanting to see a human face behind the class content. Sally expressed this thought clearly:

Even when a class is mainly online, I like to see my instructor. This was very important to me because I know there is a real person there you can reach out to. I want to know that a person is teaching me.”

Sally perceived video-chat as more of a video-stream, not a two-way communication process. Other participants perceived the use of different communication tools, including video-chat, as a way to diversify learning, enhance the communication process, and connect with the coursework. John stated,

I would have liked to take a class with video lessons, because I like to get the point of view of what is important to the teacher in each chapter instead of reading a chapter and trying to decide what the most important aspects are. My wife tells me I am a freak because I want to learn everything and she thinks most people in college just want to get through the class. Video-chat would require an immediate answer, which I could see as being very useful. It is difficult to have a question while I am reading the material, and then have to wait to get a response, especially because I have only a limited amount of time to work on my classes.

Patty mirrored John’s feelings regarding video-chat and response: “I would like to see more interaction through video-chat. It is easier to ask questions when you are talking to someone rather than sending them email and waiting for a reply that may not even answer your question.”
Jack missed the face-to-face interaction inherent in distance learning courses. He described his feelings about video-chat: “I would have loved it if the instructor would have had video-chat time however because I would have had more of a connection; it would have been more personable.”

John and Jack were among those students who were taking online classes because of the convenience but missed the interactions of face-to-face meetings. However, not all students were enthusiastic about having video-chat as part of the distance learning structure. Karen stated, “I do not like the video-chat idea because when you do an online class, you get to do it in the comfort of your home. I think video-chat would take away that comfort.”

Katy had some experience with video-chat, but in a personal setting:

On a side note, I do use video-chat often, but for my personal life as I am currently in a long distance relationship with a man who is working in Israel. In this context, it has been a very important relationship tool because we sometimes go many months without being together.

Wayne also elected to interview with video-chat using Skype™ for this research. However, when we made the connection, I could see him but he could not see me, so it became an awkward communication situation. We completed a follow-up interview, and vowed to try it again, but time never allowed that luxury. This experience pairs with what Jack said about the convenience factor of online classes. It is not about not having the desire to take a class; it is about not having the time set in a day.

There was some confusion as to how the video-chat tool could be used with online coursework. Some of my research participants thought video-chat was having video streamed into a file and placed into the course management system or website for viewing.
Another issue was that not all students felt like they needed to see the instructor. Both Robert and Jack agreed that they did not need to know the appearance of the distance learning professor. However, Jack said that he would have had more of a connection, stating,

I have no idea what they looked like, nor was this important to me. I cannot picture what my professor looked like, but I would have loved it if I would have had more of a connection through interactions because it would have made the class more personable.

Robert and Jack were self-directed learners, but still would have appreciated more of a connection during distance learning coursework. In Knowles, Holton, and Swanson’s (2005) book titled *The Adult Learner*, there are five assumptions provided that describe adult learner characteristics. Among those characteristics are two that discuss self-directed learners, the first being that if the learners are self-directed they are also self-motivated after they experience a need that is relevant in their life situations. The second characteristic of self-directed learners is that they possess self-confidence, making external factors less important. Though Jack missed the face-to-face component of seeing his instructor, he did not want to give up the convenience of distance learning. Thus, the desire to see and connect visually to his instructor was important but not the priority of his learning goals.

**Chapter Summary**

The adult learners in this research were asked to identify, comment on, and express a preference for the computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools used in the distance learning course in which they were enrolled. Email was found to be the most frequently used CMC tool for communication, with all (100%) students reporting its use. Course management systems were the second most frequently used tool (96%). Texting was found to be the respondents’ preferred
communication tool, just not with coursework. Because texting requires the release of personal telephone numbers between students and instructors, most students preferred email for coursework communications. Blogging was not seen as an educational tool by the research participants, but they used Twitter for personal use, mostly updates from various media outlets. Wikis were used for educational purpose, but for linear research, not an interactive communication tool. Video-chat was a tool that held the most interest for students because of the visual component of communication that is missing with most distance education. However, students did not express much interest in having video-chat as a tool because they did not want to be at a set place and time with an online learning course.

Chapter 5 will discuss how using the distance learning communication tools included in this study influenced perceptions of the adult learner participants about the faculty of online courses. Chapter 5 will also discuss these same adult learners and their feelings about distance education given their online experiences.
CHAPTER 5
PERCEPTIONS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

The first sub-question in my study asked participants how perceptions of communication influenced their impressions of distance education faculty. The students described preconceived feelings they had about expectations for distance learning professors. Participants utilized various computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools for coursework to interact with instructors. These adult learners also had clear expectations about instructors regarding coursework for easier planning in and around students’ work and personal lives. These descriptions were found and depicted through coding students’ answers and emerged into three common topics. The prevailing topics found about instructors in my study were CMC tool training, organization, and response time from instructors.

CMC Tool Training

“It amazes me how some professors go way beyond to help students succeed no matter what time of day.” This statement came from Norma, answering the question regarding the most surprising element of an online class. Students look for instructors to provide clear directions in an organized manner for successful learning whether online or face-to-face (Davis, 2009). Because many students need distance education for convenience or out of necessity, the need for methodic directives is critical for success (Bourne, 2013). Adult learners who are at least 25 years old constitute the majority (77%) of the post-secondary education student body (Stokes, 2006). These same adult students would consider completing a degree fully online because of
multiple responsibilities straining their time management (Stokes, 2006). Being able to stay at home while completing coursework allows for more efficient time management of numerous obligations that might not have been an option several years ago (Sloan Consortium, 2013; Stokes, 2006). Adult learners are also different because they bring more experience to their education objectives and, as a result, may have even higher expectations of their instructors than younger counterparts (Andersson, Kopsen, Larson & Milana, 2012).

When appealing to the learning needs of adult distance students, instructors must consider the experience of those students with technology and computer-mediated communication tools. The group of adult learners at least 30 years old in my study had varied experiences with technology, as described in Chapter 4. While many students in my study had vast experience, even employment in the field of technology, others found educational platforms such as Blackboard to be intimidating. With such diverse learning backgrounds, how does an instructor address technology needs effectively? Students in my study had strong feelings about faculty when engaged with online learning, such as that provided by Norma, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. Understanding perceptions about the learning process and what students feel about interaction with faculty is important for research when considering the needs of these participants.

Learners should be given choices of communication tools to support instruction and provided with clear direction when they are expected to use an unfamiliar technology (Zhao, Alvarez-Torres, Smith, & Tan, 2004). This research reflects what was found in my study when many students who were engaged in distance learning became flustered if they did not know how to use a tool and were not provided adequate instruction. However, I additionally wanted to find
out what students felt about faculty when learning online and if they had different expectations about online versus face-to-face communication with faculty.

Students who participated in the interviews shared that they felt instructors should be responsible for explaining new technology. A few had suggestions for how instructors could improve their students’ abilities when using unfamiliar computer-mediated tools. Jack said that instructions should “gauge where your students’ skill levels are with technology by asking questions or have them fill out an introduction sheet; kind of like a survey.” Karen and Sue stated they were open to using unfamiliar technology, but they wanted the instructor to provide direction.

Not only were students flustered when proper directions were not provided for technology, but they also equated distance learning instructors’ skill levels to be lower when using technology when training was not provided. If instructors did not provide adequate instructions, the students perceived this as the instructor not understanding the CMC tool. Patty shared her experience with an online course:

Some professors didn’t know how to operate the equipment properly at their end, with some instructors having students come in for presentations. I found I had to ask permission to use technology with some instructors but only if I attended a percentage of classes. One instructor had problems with Breeze, so she came up with the solution to find a bridge phone of some sort to allow me to hear, but I still could not see her. This made the sound quality better than before because the needs of Breeze bandwidth requirements.

Macromedia Breeze™ is video-streaming software that was purchased by Adobe Connect™ (Adobe, 2014). As stated in Chapter 3, students were encouraged to discuss any technology they used for communication with distance learning. Breeze was used by Patty’s university in a distance learning program for graduate studies. It should be noted that the
university decided to pilot delivery to students who lived further than 200 miles from campus.

Patty described her experience with Breeze:

Nobody else has had to go through the horrid experience of Breeze; I found out that when they projected me onto the wall in classes. My face was about five feet wide and tall, all pores very visible, and when I would meet people face-to-face, like peers, they’d be like, wow, you are skinny! You looked so fat on the screen, great huh? I’m 115 pounds, lol. Anyway, I still took a few online classes during Ph.D. program and came back twice a week during semesters where Breeze didn’t work.

Patty was uncomfortable with her distorted image that was projected into the class for other students to view. She laughed about the technology issue, but clearly it was still bothering her after the experience. Scott stated what many students felt or had experienced: “A tutorial may help most new users to online and hybrid classes. In my first class we met face-to-face and my instructor went over how to operate Blackboard in order to access tests, quizzes, etc.”

Al also had experience with training and technology, but only because he spent many hours learning the technology:

My least favorite experience was last summer when I took a one-hour credit technology course that should have been worth four hours. With technology everyone begins at a different level. I grew by leaps and bounds and spent a ton of time on the class. Someone else might have started off knowing a lot and spent very little time. If we had been in a classroom, the teacher might have seen this and adjusted expectations.

I asked Al if he was going to use any of what he learned and how he felt about distance learning. Al stated:

That same least favorite experience became my favorite because I learned so much! The teacher had us going to so many links that were wonderful. I learned that there are so many helps online for technology. I really became a life-long technology learner from that class.

Al’s struggle with technology became a positive opportunity to use new tools applied in a distance learning course on a regular basis. Paula also had struggles with using communication tools when she was unclear about directions:
The only new things I have learned are Blackboard. Of course I would use Blackboard again because I find it very useful. I like that I know how to use it and it does not change much. I am not intimidated by Blackboard. I can get overwhelmed with technology, especially when no instruction is given or explanation.

I asked Paula what seemed to make her feel overwhelmed:

I am not as comfortable with online classes as other students, but I stuck it out. I wish we had more interaction with the instructor. I feel I need this because I am not as computer savvy as my peers seem to be. I am worried about asking question though because I feel as I will come off needy or be a pain.

Using multiple tools was an issue for some students. The adult learners in this study wanted to understand why they were being asked to use or try different CMC tools. Thus, using multiple CMC tools was not a desirable feature when such use did not add value to learning.

Katy, for example, said this about the use of CMCs:

Sometimes too many tools create too much chaos. It seems over the top to use blogs, wikis, Facebook or Twitter unless it is some sort of IT programming course where you are working with these type of graphical user interfaces.

However, the adult learners in my study were open to using new technology as long as they had guidance with how to use a particular CMC tool or how they might use a particular tool in the future. Many scholars (King, 2002; Merrill, 2003; O’Lawrence, 2007) have found that adult learners feel technology to be a barrier for learning online, but my study does not support this finding. In fact, quite the opposite. Most of the participants in this study were open to learning new tools and desired instruction when using a communication tool with which they were not familiar.
Organization

Besides having support and training for using CMC tools, students also desired a distance learning instructor who provided clear directions and organization. Dave explained:

I enjoyed managing my personal, work, and school schedules and being able to do the coursework at any time and location. I disliked that certain instructions provided by the faculty member were not concise, especially since my major was not focused on the subject matter and students had difficulty comprehending logical statements.

Other students also felt more involvement with the instructor was a key element of a course. Larry described one difficult situation:

My instructor gave us a study guide that was to be available each Sunday, which did not happen once. I finally had to call the Dean after which not only the guides did not show on time but also none of the questions on the guide was included on the test.

Norma also had experience with inadequate instruction, which she described this way:

Not having a good explanation from the professor on what is expected of us on the syllabus and not being able to get a response from them in a timely manner. It was extra work because you have to teach yourself and there is no one there to answer your questions when you have them.”

Thus, having clear instructions was important to the participants. Patty said, “the way an instructor arranges content can make it easier or more difficult; you want items to be clearly visible.” Good organization of an online course is important to students. Asked to describe her thoughts on organization, Patty stated, “technology really isn’t the problem or barrier; a bigger problem actually is courses that aren’t well organized in terms of timing, layout of content with all readings mixed up instead of organized by unit or by the week.”

Marilyn experienced another aspect of online learning that not all students shared because her class was open to students in different time zones. Marilyn perceived issues with time management when communicating with these students: “For my certification program, I had to
do the entire online thing, which I did not like. There were people from various parts of the
country there and working on their own schedules and it became a hot mess.” I asked Marilyn
what she meant by a “hot mess” and she clarified:

What I meant by a hot mess is that it didn't seem structured or organized. Though there
were “guidelines” as to when to post, but because people had other things going on in
their lives they checked in when it worked for them. Obviously that maybe the advantage
of taking online classes but yet group work is still expected. People were in different
cities, different time zones and in different phases of lives because they were married,
single, or had kids, or even kid-less. The instructors were either mothers with small
children who enjoyed working from home or people making some side money because they
had jobs in the field so the entire program was a hot mess.

Dave described experiences with the organization of online coursework from a couple of
classes:

The instructor for the customer service class did a stupendous job to answer all of our
questions and reminded us about assignments, shared helpful tips to navigate around
Blackboard, graded our assignments promptly and gave us candid feedback about our
course work. The instructor for my other online class did not communicate effectively
and the way she conveyed her information was vague in which it made it difficult to
understand on how to complete class and group assignments. I had to contact the
instructor continuously about getting her feedback on my homework and final grades on
quizzes and tests.

Other students discussed the organization of a course and how that reflected on the
professor. Without the ability to see the instructor face-to-face, students relied on how
instructors interacted, facilitated, or provided direction to gauge them as a professional. Wayne
had this theory about why professors facilitated the way they did online:

There were other professors who abused the system and used it as a substitute for actually
teaching. An online course that’s nothing but links to other sites isn’t being taught it is,
at best, being facilitated, and in my opinion not worthy of issuing college credit…and the
professor isn’t worthy of his pay for that term. Like any other tool you can think of from
a handgun to a screwdriver, its efficiency is dependent on the user, and it can help or ruin
the project.
Wayne equated the interactions with professors and how they set the course in a CMS such as Blackboard with how efficient they were at facilitating an online course. There were several students who had positive experiences with online learning and the organization of the faculty. These same learners shared that an organized instructor who responds to questions, returns graded work, and is an interactive participant in the class increases the perception of the instructor in a positive manner. Conversely, an instructor who was not organized or did not respond or return graded assignments quickly was perceived negatively for organization and sense of immediacy towards students.

Response Time

The most passionate responses from students involved in my research were about response time expectations. Students had very specific notions about when and how often faculty should interact when teaching from a distance. Students’ equated response time to their perceptions of instructors.

The respondents used various communication tools including telephony, social networking, course management systems and video-chat. Response time, because it also correlated to a tool’s efficiency, was cited as the most important component for effective communication. Students expected instructors to use the tools provided in the course, and use them frequently. Given this, I asked some students to justify what they meant by proper response time. Katy explained why she needed a quick turn-around for response time when engaged in online education:

I needed to assure myself that I was indeed grasping and understanding the subject matter, also if an exam was coming up quickly, it would be good to know that that we are
on the same page as the instructor, or if not, that I can get there because the instructor pointed out the correct path and where I’d gotten lost. Instructors need to hold hands with the new online students. Let them know they will not break it (the communication tool) and encourage them to try all the buttons and get comfortable with how each functions. Show them that it’s not a big scary monster that is going to bite them.

Norma had some positive experiences with instructors that were cited earlier in this chapter, however, she also offered an alternative perception about distance learning faculty: “In online courses some of the professors I had were not as helpful as face-to-face ones. The response time was too long, therefore making me feel like the online students do not matter.” Norma suggested this: “Definitely see the reviews for professor and how fast they respond to students before you enroll in an online course. In most of my online courses I would interact with my instructors at least three times a week.” Sally shared in her interview that interaction with the professor is very important: “It shows that a professor is there and concerned with your learning and what they are teaching.” Sue stated how interactions with instructors created a positive outcome for her:

You communicate with your instructor usually to get answers about assignments. When you are waiting for a response, you try harder to figure out what you want or what you are trying to do. You end up over-analyzing the assignment. You need the answer to come before the due date so you can get your work done. I mean, what if you are working full-time and you have one night for homework, so you have a question and you can’t do your work without further instruction; instructors needs to be involved.

Sue was not the only student who felt this way about involvement. Larry also stated he needed more involvement from his professor and explained why he would not take another online class: “I knew nothing about the instructor and class except for what I heard; you have to take a class with an involved instructor.” I asked Larry what he meant by “involved”:

What I meant when I said she was not involved was that she never interjected in any of the conversation. If you asked a question it took 3 to 4 days for her to get back to you and only then because I called the Dean to complain. The instructor set up the
Blackboard site and that was the end of her involvement. A parrot could have taught the
class for all we know.

Larry and Sue expected more interaction with instructors when learning from a distance.

Wayne was more descriptive about what he wished for when taking an online course and what he
expected out of his instructor:

Many professors include a photo on their web page or the classes’ homepage. Some
professors I have/had made an effort to meet personally, either for individual help or just
to meet the person on the other end. It was important for me to “see” my professor.
Somebody who has the ability to have significant impact on your coursework and your
grade point average shouldn’t be a physical unknown in my opinion. I have to have some
idea of whom I am talking to…. I am a visual learner. Professors who just prattle on and
have nothing to look at are not effective for me. Those who engage the class and being
able to see someone is critical engagement, and have greater efficacy for me as a student.

Wayne explained that even though he was learning from a distance, being able to see
what his instructor looked like was extremely important to him. Wayne put a lot of importance
on appearance, and he was not alone with his thoughts about seeing an online coursework
instructor. Dave also explained an option that would make him more comfortable when learning
at a distance: “It would intrigue me if the online course would offer two-way video conferencing
or to have the option to video call the instructor or classmates.” Dave further shared how seeing
the instructor and classmates would make online coursework more productive: “I would make
the class more productive by incorporating videos that have recorded lectures, encourage live
face-to-face chat time via online to dialogue with classmates and provide additional resources in
the course curriculum for those that struggle with self-learning.” Clearly, being able to see the
instructor and classmates was a valued opinion and suggestion from some of the participants in
my study, but not all students needed to see instructors. Marilyn stated, “I was never interested
in seeing my instructors or know what they looked like, nor was it important to me.” Marilyn’s
experience was different from her peers, but possibly she has less need for visual contact than
her counterparts.

Lori had experience with several types of online instructors. She shared her thoughts on
how different instruction methods worked for class:

I enjoyed the majority of the instructors; each interacted with their own style. The
greatest annoyance was one instructor who posted work assignments for the class with
accompanying due dates and then was not heard from again until two weeks before class
ended, when the instructor posted all the homework grades all at once. This instructor just
posted assignments and readings, but no instruction took place. Having said that, the
balance of my other online instructors, four individuals, were anywhere from decent to
really great, interacting at least once a week.

Marilyn gave more details about her thoughts about what to expect with an online
instructor. She wanted to have somebody who was compassionate because of a personal crisis
she experienced during class. Marilyn said:

All my instructors were female; they seemed understanding if I ever reached out to
them. I had a personal matter that took place in the beginning of the program and I could
not keep up with the work due to being hospitalized. Instead of dropping me from the
class, they allowed me to make up the work that I missed. Since the entire certification
program was online, there were several instructors who may have responded to every
thread or comment, which could have been on a daily basis or some that responded
several times per week. Outside of the assignments/discussions, we had no other
interactions.

I asked Marilyn to expand on what she thought about discussion boards and the
interactions with instructors:

I feel that when interacting with face-to-face instructors you can ask them questions and
they have to provide you with answers on the spot, which makes them (at times) in my
eyes more knowledgeable. The ones that respond online have time to look the answers
up. This may be just my perception because the turnaround time of online responding
was delayed. It could be given to various reasons such as the instructor not constantly
sitting behind their computer.

Marilyn’s perception of an online instructor was different from that of a face-to-face
instructor who was able to provide instant responses to students. However, she did acknowledge
that this might not always be true. Because of the delay with online communication, distance education instructors might be able to contemplate and provide a more thoughtful response. It seemed as if Marilyn had some of the same feelings as Wayne and Dave when it came to having a human feel to the course even when online. Wayne and Dave described the need as visual, but Marilyn named response time and instant answers as evidence of an adequate human touch.

Pete explained that an instructor who is organized and understands technology ensures success with distance learning: “An organized instructor knows technology well enough to help students when they don’t know how to upload information or access the information on the course. I would want to be sure to have easy access to instructor feedback.” Besides the training and organization, students such as Pete wanted dependable and quick responses from their online instructors.

The adult learners who participated in my research had specific opinions about expected response time when interacting with distance learning coursework. These students said they wanted and needed responses much faster if the class was online. Jack stated, “I expect instructors to respond every couple of hours when the class is online, but you should also check to see if the teacher has online hours.”

Students in general expected responses from instructors within the day a message was sent. If the communication was generated during a weekend, then 24 to 48 hours was the expected response time. Wayne said that “for a face-to-face course during the week, I want a response within eight hours, if it is during the weekend, the response should be within 24 hours.”

To the question posed to the study participants about appropriate response times, the majority of students (66%) desired a response time between eight and 24 hours when submitting a question about an assignment to an instructor. Twenty-seven percent of the adult learners
thought that 24 hours to two days was a fitting response time. The remaining respondents (7%) felt that four to eight hours was the fitting response time for instructors to respond to a question when facilitating a course at a distance.

Scott had different thoughts about response times from instructors. Scott gauged that instructors might have other priorities in life besides the distance learning course, though ideally a response would be sent “within the day the message was sent or 24 hours. If message was sent on Saturday, then response should be on Sunday; I hope they have a life outside work as well.”

Katy described a specific example where communication failed between her class and the instructor. Katy had an unusual situation with an instructor who took pregnancy leave without informing the class. Response time would have been poor regardless in this situation:

The only time I wished for other ways to communicate was when the cold emotionless black and white of the computer screen was not able to get a point across or when the instructor disappeared for half the semester with no notice and came back four weeks later telling us she had a baby; this was an online course that required weekly feedback and she chose to not take advantage of that to communicate this crucial detail and notify everyone that she would be incommunicado for a few weeks and to not expect any feedback of communication of any kind.

Patty agreed with the need for feedback in a timely manner, but shared that not only do response times from instructors affect learning, they also affect the instructors’ reputations as facilitators:

In an undergrad Math Statistics course – it was a hard course – the assignments (application of book info using various online tools to chart and graph stats) was (sic) horrible because everything was cumulative in terms of knowledge, and there was no feedback, no instructor interaction at all. After three or four begging emails, he finally typed me one sentence saying “you are doing it fine” … because I didn’t know if I was doing something correctly or not with respect to the use of the software tools to calculate stats, and so I knew my answers were either all right or all wrong, but no feedback six weeks into course, and I was freaking out. During the class, others had those problems, we had all been posting questions on the discussion board, and when prof never answered, some students even started slamming the professor, right on the discussion boards, which shows how little he was monitoring.
Hew and Cheung (2008) found that when instructors responded within three days of a post, students felt encouraged and respected, thus they wanted to work harder in the course. Patty’s comment regarding how students reacted when they did not receive timely responses seems to reinforce this connection between instructors’ response time and students’ feelings about those instructors.

Several students expressed positive thoughts about communication with instructors. Pete stated, “I did not have much interaction with the instructor. In fact, in the class I finished up yesterday, the instructor gave comments after each module of work I submitted. The instructor was encouraging and kind.” Wayne reported the shortest response time – two minutes – because his instructor was online at the time he emailed. Some students involved in the research were not expecting instant responses from instructors. There were some students that did not expect a response for a week. Al offered this observation:

Response time has been satisfactory for me. I have been getting over a 3.0 grade point average in my online classes so it has been a good experience. I think a week to respond is a decent guesstimate. It depends on the instructor’s workload.

Al was not the only student to respect the instructor’s workload. Bob also mentioned that consideration of the instructor should be a factor with response time: “I cannot judge what the appropriate time should be for a response because I do not know the teacher’s workload.” Other students thought that if the instructor alerted the class about what to expect, that would resolve any issues about an appropriate response time. One such student, Katy, suggested that an instructor inform the class about expectations regarding response time: “Twenty-four hours would be great, however, the instructor will usually advise students of the response time to expect. As long as the instructor stays within that response time, that is sufficient.” Katy commented further about the importance of timely instructor communication:: “If you are
learning a new subject matter, timely feedback and grades are tantamount to a successful completion of the course.” Wayne agreed with Katy, but explained his reasoning about relevant communication, response times, and distance learning. In response to the question “was there something making response time more critical than normal,” Wayne’s reply was unqualified:

Any kind of deadline. Of course, less procrastination helps as well, but there’s a point where unless you are doing the assignment five minutes after it is posted, you lose some time of the project. Something that is assigned in week 4 that is not due until week 10 isn’t going to get worked on right away. Around week 9 however, long lead times are going to cause issues. The schedule and response time make time frames sensitive. Online students are typically working as well, and between work commitments, family obligations and the fact that days only become stocked with 24 hours apiece, your schedule can quickly make the response time a lot of bigger of an issue. Online courses are marketed to be flexible within your schedule, but when your professor takes days to respond, it frustrates the process and mollifies the stated benefits of taking an online course.

Moreover, Wayne said that he used email as his CMC tool of choice because it flows back and forth between his work, school and personal life. Wayne discussed the importance of email response times and the effects on his schedule: “I use email hourly, if not more often. Between my education, my professional life and my personal life – email is a constant presence in my life.” Wayne explained his perceptions of the importance of dependability with response times:

Response time completely affects the course! Delays ripple downstream. With a purely online course, you usually set aside specific times to work on the course and if it takes hours or days to get responses, that really guns up your schedule and at the end of the semester or with a final deadline, it is a big problem.

Wayne discussed how response time affect schedules both professionally and personally. As an adult learner, Wayne saw the need to use consistently one CMC tool that he found dependable in all facets of his life. He shared that checking multiple communication devices was not something he was fond of doing, saying, “simple is better.”
Other students equated course success with the response time in online communication. Karen discussed personal issues that created problems for her and why the response time was important when she was involved with distance learning:

I want to get an answer within a few hours of the request being sent. I want to complete my work, not wait for five days when it is convenient for the instructor to get back to me. It should not matter if I am working ahead...that is the reason some people take an online course...so they can work at their individual pace with work and school and family.

While some students wanted immediate feedback, other students realized that being at a distance gave them opportunities that they might not have taken advantage of if they were not online. Pete felt an online course gave him more access to the instructor and the confidence to ask questions when he needed answers:

In some ways I had more interaction with the instructor in an online course because I felt more free to email if I had questions. In a face-to-face class I probably would have waited until the next class time or not asked at all.

The participants involved in my study had varied opinions about many of the questions that were asked. While I had to probe a few students through email or additional interview sessions to expand on their answers, most of the students were forthright with responses and wanted to share their perceptions regarding online experiences using CMC tools. For example, the first time I interacted with Pete, he was not as forthcoming with his perceptions of faculty or courses. However, when I interacted with him a second time, he provided rich examples of why he thought online learning was a great venue despite having some technology issues and missing the ability to connect visually to his professor. Pete found that he enjoyed new technology and now applies this technology to work, but learning the new CMC tools was not easy and took significant time from his personal schedule. Pete acknowledged he could not continue school if it were not for the ability to learn online because he lives in a remote area. Like Pete, Wayne
emphasized the importance of needing online coursework. Wayne worked on schoolwork in many venues whenever he could find time around his work schedule. He spoke about taking a test in an airport lounge and waiting for professors to respond to questions so he could complete assignments. Along with Wayne, most of the students felt strongly about response time from instructors; that it should be faster than with face-to-face classes. However, there were a few students like Al, who shared that they considered the instructor’s workload with elevated expectations. Al thought about professors’ time constraints beyond the course he was taking and considered they had obligations such as additional classes, family, or various other responsibilities.

Impressions of Distance Learning Coursework

The second sub-question addresses non-traditional adult student perceptions regarding computer-mediated communication tools and how these students’ experiences influenced their impressions about distance learning. While these students desired distance learning courses, the experiences they had differed depending on expectations.

“I think anyone could do it. But if the person does not know computers very well he or she might want a computer-savvy friend nearby when they get started.” This quote from Pete was provided when asked about his thoughts regarding future distance learning coursework. Wayne also shared why knowing what to expect and how to react to distance learning requirements was important. Wayne stated why environment should be considered:

In an online class, you have to be disciplined enough to set aside the time and force yourself to actively participate. It’s very easy to get behind and very difficult to get caught up. So for me, having a daily appointed time to read and write was the biggest preparation. It also involved making pointed warnings to others in the house about
leaving me alone and not disturbing me unless the house were on fire, the moon collided with the earth, or someone with a badge and a warrant had arrived at the front door. It has to be a virtual re-creation of the face-to-face learning environment to be effective.

Wayne explained further what he recognized as critical preparation for a distance learner:

The online experience was mostly lacking in interaction. There will be a (seemingly large) percentage of students that will take an online course because they perceive it to be “easier” and will try to make it that easy by participating at bare minimum levels, if that much. Being able to post extensively, more-so than a face to face class would likely tolerate, was the biggest enjoyment factor. Other than the lack of participation, technical problems topped the turn-offs. Systems fail, and that’s a part of using systems, but tech support was hard to come by when systems failed, and they did, a lot, during my online course experiences. While I have to accept blame for panicking when something was due in 20 minutes and the college’s system was down, but if you’re going to tout the ‘convenience’ factor then the entire available time needs to actually be available.

Yes, I should be getting stuff in well ahead of the deadline but in the real world, things sometimes go down to the wire despite the best planning. Schools offering online courses should be more open and honest about the time and discipline commitments needed to be successful. I see almost no discussion whatever on the part of the institutions on how important this is. Courses have prerequisites for having completed other courses, yet no prerequisites for the ability to succeed in an online concept exist, and they should.

There are people who will never do well in online courses and I feel the institutions should screen people for the demeanor needed to be a part of the new paradigm. Students who aren’t able to do it well are a drag on those who are within the class. A college would have no problem removing someone who is disruptive in a face-to-face class but seems loathe to force online students to take things seriously. Failing to do so hurts the students who do participate and give the needed time and renders the institution as little more than a cashier.

Wayne, unlike Pete, felt that distance learning is not for everyone and that institutions offering distance education courses should screen students prior to enrollment. Being sure of a student’s ability to handle the course would increase student success of handling class requirements.

Norma also felt preparation is important to online learning. Unlike Wayne, she explained that students, not the schools, should be responsible for prioritizing the workload of an online course:
I would say make sure you know how to manage your time. Lot of times people think that taking online classes is easier because you do not have to go to class but it is not. Also, if you do not understand something ask questions no sense in guessing because you will guess wrong. I wish someone told me how to manage work, school, and family life when I took my very first online class. I did not do so well in it. Anyone who wants to finish school but have responsibilities that prevents them from going to traditional classes. Also, anyone who is willing to put in the time and effort to further their education.

Dave concurred with Norma about preparation and how to manage coursework when engaged online:

I would advise my peers to ensure that they have the technology readily available, i.e., computer and internet speed; make them understand that online classes are more for independent learners; to be conscientious on how the instructor and students collaborate; keep track of all the assignments illustrated in the course syllabus; do not procrastinate about doing the coursework; do not hesitate to communicate with the instructor or pose questions to classmates; and utilize time management effectively for school and personal life balance.

Jay explained why online coursework and its expectations are important for students wishing to pursue education but who are hindered by other priorities:

I am enrolled in online courses for a couple of reasons. One was that the fact that I am a bit older than most other students with different responsibilities and therefore allows me to work around those. I guess the second is that I also have to help take care of my infant son so it is convenient to take classes around his schedule.

Jay noted that it is not just preparation for the coursework discussed by Pete, Wayne and Norma, but also the fact that he has various responsibilities that would keep him from continuing his education if distance learning was not an option. Scott shared why online learning is important for his personal growth:

I have a 6-month old daughter that I am helping care for, the mother and I are not married. I live with my mom and I try to help with bills but currently do not work. After not being in school for 12 years, everything has changed. By this I mean the way tests are proctored, instructors’ demeanor and technology, obviously. That being said, online classes are very beneficial for older students as well as those with children.

I was curious about what Scott meant about “demeanor,” so I asked. He explained:
What I meant by demeanor was that instructors are taking attendance much more seriously. Apparently it is for financial aid purposes, or so I’m told. They also appear to be more into teaching than when I was last there and seem to show genuine concern when a student has questions or needs a day for personal reasons. I think that being a 30-something may also make instructors perceive me as being more responsible and the fact that I did not get the memo about rhinestone belts, skinny jeans and t-shirts with dragon on them being fashionable. Maybe I don’t look like such a punk so I come off more sincere, so because of this I feel demeanor is set with appearance and first impressions. Scott discussed how he felt instructors viewed students in a face-to-face setting, although this research is about distance learning. He felt that being an older student helped him gain respect from instructors aside from his younger counterparts. Scott’s comments about demeanor were not what I expected, but should be considered as valid with older students.

Distance Learning Issues

The same perceptions about CMC with instructors could also alter how students perceive distance learning courses because of the structure of class discussions. John seemed to value how the discussions were being facilitated and how students responded to the course content as an important element of satisfaction when learning. For example, John shared his thoughts about online discussions: “While communication with the instructor is very important the hardest parts of the classes for me were the discussion boards and the communication with fellow students.” Jack shared his thoughts about communicating with fellow students:

It seems as though all the generations going through high school and beginning college have trouble communicating face-to-face or over the phone. They would rather text or email, or even Facebook. Technology is great and fun, but we forget the importance of basic human communication.”

Sally also had issues with CMC tools, specifically the asynchronous communication within a discussion board:
The outcomes I have experienced have varied. I have some trouble with Blackboard communication because even when there is a response, I have still had more questions regarding the response and it could take a few days to have a 5-10 minute conversation.

Marilyn had similar feelings about communication using the discussion board CMC tool, and shared her frustrations with trying to manage her time but having to wait for her peers to join the discussion: “If people wait until last minute to post or respond and I do mine at the beginning, I cannot complete the assignment on my timetable and then have to rush my work at the end of the assignment.”

In addition to the timing and frequency of communication, students such as Jay commented on the need for focus and priority when taking an online course. Jay needed to be able to complete assignments when he had time set aside for education. Jay was flustered with time management and the times he decided (because of his personal schedule) were appropriate for collaboration with his peers.

Dave explained why he decided to take online courses: “

The advantage of taking the class online was to manage my school and personal schedules on my own without having a set class schedule. The disadvantages were the class workload and it was challenging to maintain consistent communication with my classmates. Since I had previous knowledge about my personal online experience, I wanted to formulate my own opinions.

Al mirrored what Dave and Marilyn stated about preparation for online courses: “You need to be disciplined because the online classes take time. Online classes are good for someone who does not want to spend time driving to class but needs to be somebody who is self-motivated and willing to work.” Norma agreed with both Dave and Al. She shared why she would take another online course:

I would take another online class because of my work hours and because I like working at my own pace. I would tell people make sure you give yourself enough time to complete assignments; do not procrastinate because it is so easy to do.
Wayne had the same time management needs as Al, Dave and Norma. He explained how he took online classes but also managed his time as a successful student:

The marketing for online classes is in fact one of convenience, do it on your own time. The first semester I took a full course load, I was working and traveling constantly. I wrote papers on airplanes, took quizzes in airport lounges. I took an online final exam in a hotel room at The Venetian in Las Vegas overlooking the strip. I took breaks at a transmitter site in the mountains 45 miles north of Phoenix and participated in the classroom discussions. Had it not been for the flexibility of the online milieu, I would not have been able to take all of those four courses that term.

Lori had distinct ideas about what it took to be successful as a distance learner and gave ideas about what to expect when taking an online class:

The ideal candidate is one who is prepared to use the “online” part of a course to accomplish their own personal goal. The candidate/student should be prepared to take the initiative by logging in often, engaging in dialog (via blog, wiki or email) with both classmates and instructor. They should have access to a computer and reliable access to internet. Self-discipline is necessary, to stay current with assignments and to realize the value of what is to be learned in the class. An online student has to have the ability to motivate from within which is necessary in a situation where the instructor/class is disengaged.

The adult learners in my research were consistent in their thinking about what a student needed to have for skills, technology, and organization when learning from a distance. Skill level did not necessarily relate to the most recent CMC tools available, but more about the time required for learning a new tool. Al, for example, explained that learning CMC tools was very taxing, but that learning how to use those tools became a positive experience because he found the tools useful after class was complete. Sally shared Al’s thoughts about learning new technology; however, she explained that even with proper instruction, she does not want to learn new technology unless it benefits her lifestyle after the course is completed:

I don’t really have an interest in learning a lot of new technology I never really have. I feel like it takes too much work to learn it, when there are already options out there for communication. I don’t even have the web on my cell phone. I would if I had the extra
time and planned on doing something with it, other than that. I am happy with the easy things I already have and know.

Sally did not want to learn new technology because she felt the time involved to learn the new CMC tools would take too much time to learn. Sally had a carefree attitude about trying new technology or finding a valid use to adopt it to her lifestyle. However the majority of the students involved with my research embraced new technology and were curious learners.

Chapter Summary

The participants in my study were quick to associate any issues with technology with the instructor, even when, in some cases, they acknowledged the school had support staff to assist with students’ needs. During the research process, students explained that when they did not have access to online faculty in a visual sense, they had higher expectations for the online communication that was used. Participants expected the instructors teaching distance learning courses to be able to help them through problems they might incur when using CMC tools and equated this with how efficient instruction was during the course.

In addition to an instructor being perceived as proficient with technology, another important factor for students was organization. Students desired an organized website and an instructor who responded to their needs regarding assignments. Students felt a highly organized course with clear directives reflected positively on the professors’ knowledge and ability to facilitate.

Along with associating positive perceptions with an instructor’s explicit organization, adult learners in my study also thought response time when communicating with the instructor was an important element, influencing how they felt about online faculty. Most students
expected quick responses when learning from a distance because they had less interaction than a face-to-face setting. Not all students, however, felt entitled to a quick response; a few students had expectations of 24 hours or longer if the question or message sent was during a weekend.

Most of the students in this study wanted to learn new technology. More importantly, these students enjoyed and wanted to take future distance learning courses and the majority planned to take distance learning coursework again.

The students in my study needed the flexibility of online instruction because of hectic professional and personal commitments. This did not mean they did not value education. Instead, it was that they desired higher education but not with the time required to drive to and from a brick-and-mortar campus and/or held to a set schedule. Most of the students had found success with distance learning and for that reason wanted to continue this experience.

Chapter 6 will discuss these findings and how the information uncovered through this research might be expanded with future studies.
Past studies have shown that adult learners can be resistant to new technology (Beavers, 2009; Hiemstra & Brockett, 1994; Morris, 2009). However, that was not the finding in my research. Instead, adult learners were willing to try new technology, but that willingness was tied to a perception that the technology would continue to be useful after the coursework was completed (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). This interconnection of students using new CMC tools after online coursework is completed directly links these participants to The Adult Learning Theory.

This chapter will discuss the results of this study, starting with the adult learners and perceptions about CMC tools they used for distance learning. Next, this chapter will discuss how the experience of using CMC tools influenced how students felt about distance learning faculty, followed by perceptions about distance education. Finally, the chapter will explore future implications for practitioners and new possibilities for research that might stem from this study.

My study found that distance education instructors need to consider that adult students are not necessarily tool savvy, but want to learn. This group of participants was open to using new CMC tools when engaged in distance learning. However, these students differed with how they found success learning online using different CMC tools. Some of the participants were
more independent learners whereas other students desired a higher level of support. Another finding from the research was about the tool video-chat. Some students were interested in trying to use this tool, but when the opportunity came to utilize it they resisted because of the required inconvenience of a set place and time. Additionally, the students who desired more direction and support in using the tool felt video-chat presented an opportunity to alleviate their stress because they would see the instructor and could interact with questions when learning new course knowledge. These same students also desired to see the face associated with the course because they were more comfortable learning with a human presence behind the information. Conversely, the students who did not need more support for success in an online course felt that seeing their instructor did not add to their success or value to the course.

Another finding firmly established in previous research was that adult learners gravitate towards distance learning when it is available for them because they have multiple responsibilities such as family and work (Sloan Consortium, 2013; Stokes, 2006). Because this topic was brought up several times with participants from my study, it merits mentioning as an important factor with adults and online course selection. Furthermore, because of multiple responsibilities, adult learners from my study had high expectations for response time when communicating with online instructors. These students wanted set times to receive communication sent for class to resolve class issues or questions about assignments.

Even though participants were open to using new CMC tools for coursework, they did not want to use tools for the sake of trying something new. These adult learners needed to understand the purpose behind the tool and what it could do for them after the course ended. Furthermore, if a new tool was presented for use in a class, the students desired clear, organized directions so they could learn to operate the tool quickly and not spend an inordinate amount of
time figuring out how to adopt the new tool. Now that I have listed the findings from my research, I will next discuss each of them along with recommendations.

It is true that many of the participants in my study who had no desire to learn new tools were also the students who did not have Facebook accounts or even knew what a wiki was. However, these students did want to learn at a distance because other options were not available. To capture these students, their communication needs should be addressed. Thus, the first recommendation is to offer adult learners a course in CMC tools before they enroll in online coursework. A course that is dedicated to teaching the software and tools associated with online learning might ease the anxiety that was found in previous studies with adult learners (Pickett, 2009).

Not all adult learners in my study were averse to learning a new CMC tool. Most of the participants usually embraced new technology and actively sought ways to use a CMC tool in their personal lives after the class concluded. Typically, these same students who were experienced with online learning were also more apt to learn independently and expressed appreciation for the ease of distance learning access.

Distance learning has evolved into a mode of education that enables individuals who cannot meet in a face-to-face classroom and brick-and-mortar building to continue education. Numerous educators fear the success of distance education because they worry that students will stop attending a traditional institution (Korbe, 2011). However, students just graduating from high school with minimal responsibilities only make up 25% of the college population (Complete College America, 2011). In my research, the adult learners explained that they might have never pursued higher education without distance learning opportunities. They should not be seen as students lost to the traditional face-to-face institutions, but rather as found students
who are now able to pursue their continuing educational goals. Such students are looking to build knowledge and bring that knowledge into the classroom with their work and life experiences. Being able to scaffold previous experience with education enables adult learners to find value in education (Knowles, 1998).

Computer-mediated Communication, CMC Tools and Perceptions of Distance Learning Faculty and Coursework

My first question is: What are non-traditional adult learners’ perceptions of using computer-mediated communication (CMC), tools? Being able to interact and communicate when learning online is an essential element to successful learning (Watson, 2013). Participants from my study expressed a variety of preferences and the reasoning behind their choices when learning at a distance. The single CMC tool used by all participants in my study was email. The students preferred to use email because they were accustomed to using it prior to class and found it to be dependable. Some students such as Dave also suggested they preferred email because it left a record of the communication.

Many of the adult learners noted that they also used texting as a form of classwork communication, but generally this meant peer-to-peer communication. In my study, Robert used texting as a tool more often than email even though email was his preferred CMC tool. Robert felt that texting was a personal CMC tool and wanted to keep texting as a way to communicate with family and friends. He had no desire to use it for coursework. Adult learners in my study explained texting was not used as a CMC tool because privacy was an issue both for them and instructors. Participants did not want to share their personal cell phone numbers, did not want the pressure of responding to messages on their phones, and some students were uncomfortable
with the thought of knowing their professors’ personal cell phone numbers. However, these same participants used texting as the most frequent CMC tool aside from education when communicating with family and friends.

Most of the student participants in this study had used Blackboard, a course management system and type of CMC tool. One student, Patty, had used a different course management system called D2L. Students preferred to use tools such as Blackboard because they had previous experience with this tool and liked the level of comfort with knowing what to expect. Scott was among these students, expressing, “I really like how Blackboard is set up. It is very convenient and allows me to check on my scores and informs me of upcoming assignments.” However, a few students did not have this level of comfort and that caused anxiety because their perception was that they did not receive clear instructions as to how to operate the various Blackboard tools. Sue expressed her lack of comfort when learning new technology and how that hindered her desire to enroll in another online course. She felt intimidated at the prospect of learning how to manipulate a new CMC tool alongside peers who she perceived to be at ease with this technology. What does this difference in perception mean? According to Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011), computer-based learning depends on the extent of self-direction a student has along with external support such as instructor-based or with peers. Self-direction means students are capable of learning with minimal direction and are also self-motivated (Knowles et al., 2011). Learners who have a high level of self-direction need less external support (Knowles et al., 2011). There was a clear difference between students in my study who were able to self-direct their learning and were more independent and the students who needed more instruction about learning with CMC tools.
Students from this study who had less self-directive learning skills were those students who desired instant responses from instructors. These adult learners wanted immediate answers to alleviate frustration with online assignments. They were interested in having other CMC tools to communicate with such as instant messaging through text messages or a video-chat session where they could connect quickly with the instructor. For example, once Al was required to learn Blackboard tools for a class, he became a self-directed learner. Al stated that the online course experience was the hardest yet most fulfilling of the courses he had taken because he considers himself a life-long technology learner.

Many of the CMC tools originally chosen for study in my research had not been used in participants’ distance learning courses. Among tools not used for educational purposes were wikis and blogs, although Twitter, a micro-blog, had been used for personal communication. Karen was one student who did not understand the use of blogs for class. Karen stated that a blog such as Twitter was not useful because she did not see how it could add any value to the coursework; Karen stated it was “too much” and felt that the CMC tools created more work and did not have a definite purpose. She was resistant to using them further after her online class was completed.

Several recommendations will merit consideration by educators who want to help students succeed in distance learning classes. Utilization of job-aides or instructional guides would help students overcome anxiety when learning new tools, thereby making this new technology less overwhelming. A practice discussion board prior to the course will give adult learners an opportunity to learn how to use online tools. Pre-course assessments will help to identify the students’ levels of training or expertise using a particular technology. Results of that assessment would enable an instructor to launch a buddy system that would place experienced
and inexperienced students together to work on projects, allowing the more experienced student to serve a leadership role and alleviating stress for the less-experienced learner.

Discussion of another CMC tool, video-chat, created controversy among the study participants. Students in the study who wanted video-chat said it would bring human expressions, such as nonverbal communication, into the course interactions. Research from Knowles, Holton, and Swanson (2011) explained that because some students are self-directed learners, they are self-motivated to accomplish learning goals and need less interaction. However, in my research, if students were not as confident with the technology, they felt that face-to-face delivery of course content might be accomplished with video-chat, thus overcoming any asynchronous obstacle they felt with online learning. For example, Patty, John and Pete all wanted to use video chat because the tool would deliver instant feedback. However, not all students desired what they perceived as “the convenience of meeting online” with a set time and place. This was a leading reason for students’ decisions to take a distance learning course; that they could complete the coursework when they were able to fit education in among their other responsibilities such as work, children, and family activities.

The third recommendation stemming from my study was inspired by one of the participants. Jack thought assessing students’ needs when they enroll in distance learning might help alleviate stress and anxiety created by CMC tools. Since many adult learners have been absent for a period of time from education when they return for degrees, they might not realize the extent of changes since their last experience as students. These may be students adjusting to basic schoolwork and the use of unfamiliar technologies (Picket, 2009). Having an idea of what students’ needs are with technology might help retain some of the returning adult learners so they are able achieve their education goals online (Bear, 2012; Conrad, 2002). Whereas it is not
possible to know before classes start who is a self-directed learner versus a student who needs more instruction and interaction, most higher learning institutions that promote distance learning programs have a form of support through an online service link or help-desk telephone hotline to assist students when they have questions about technology (College of DuPage, 2014; Northern Illinois University, 2014). Several colleges and universities also have recommendations for students interested in exploring online coursework so they adequately are prepared for technology and this mode of learning (College of DuPage, Northern Illinois University).

A fourth recommendation from my research would be for universities, colleges or professors to explore why some students find success with online learning and others do not. There seems to be a variety of influential elements at play concerning this issue, including technology use, convenience, and communication.

The first sub-question in my research was: According to participants in this study, how do these students’ perceptions of communication influence their impressions of distance education faculty? One of the strongest findings from my study is that adult learners had high expectations from the online instructor in regard to response time. Students explained they could get an immediate answer from a face-to-face instructor and did not want to feel that element missing when taking an online course. It is well-documented that immediacy with the instructor is important for learning (Averbeck, Morthland & Mufteyeva, 2006; Witt, 2004), but, there is little published about how important this factor is when the learning is at a distance. Most of the research concerning online immediacy explores the feeling of isolation between students, but is not focused on the students’ needs from the instructor (Bolliger & Inan, 2012; Fallon, 2011). Clearly, the students involved in my study wanted contact with the instructor, but not always in the form of traditional email communication. For example, some students wanted to know how
they were doing in the course by having instant access to assignment scores through a course management system. Other students experienced difficulties when transitioning to an online format because of lack of instant access to the professor. Students in my study wanted strong communication with instructors either through organization or basic communication.

Student emotions were mixed concerning the need to physically see or interact with the instructor. However, students wanted communication to be solid and expected regular interactions with instructors. Thus, a fifth recommendation based on this study would be that distance education instructors should provide students with set times at which expected interactions or responses during an online course would take place. For example, virtual office hours would give students a sense of control when they needed direction or to clarify information. My research found that though some students had high expectations about response times, these same students had problems receiving responses from their professors either with basic instruction or communication when enrolled online education. Thus, adult learners involved in my research wanted the same access they had experienced with face-to-face instructors.

The second sub-question is: According to participants in this study, how do these students’ perceptions of communication influence their impressions of distance learning? Additionally, privacy was important. Thus, the most popular tools being used socially might not be the best tools to choose when adding a CMC tool for online course interactions. Therefore, a sixth recommendation would be that CMC tools be limited to those that are needed for the course and, as Marilyn and Karen discussed, add value to the course material. Careful evaluation should be devoted to learning how the course communication will be delivered and how selected collaborative tools will support learning.
Another point is that students in my study wanted clear organization of class materials. They also desired specific guidelines about class expectations regarding deadlines or requirements. As several participants discussed, students will sometimes enroll in distance learning courses without understanding the commitment needed to complete coursework. Participants shared there is a misconception about when coursework should be completed, perceiving that because the class is online, coursework can be completed at a time that is convenient for the student, not when it is required by the instructor. Therefore, a seventh recommendation would be for distance learning coursework to include clear guidelines with course syllabi and a calendar to ensure that students understand when assignments are due and in what form, and when or how frequently communication with the instructor and fellow students is expected.

Additionally, because some students excel in different types of assignments; providing a variety allowing students to become involved in the learning process might enhance learning and increase motivation to learn (Thompson, 2014).

Future Research Possibilities

This examination of adult learners’ perceptions of CMC tools used for online courses, along with students’ levels of experience with technology offers insight into what enhances a course or what could be changed to meet the needs of adult learners.

Identifying the types of CMC instructional devices and guides are provided to students prior to and during online coursework would benefit delivery of distance education. Because the students in my study described different types of available instruction, reviewing students’
outcomes along with accessible support could also prove beneficial to future students. For example, a pre-assessment course would benefit adult learners who are returning to school after an extended absence. Knowing what these particular students need before they begin an online coursework could help alleviate anxiety created by learning and using CMC tools for the first time.

Other areas of possible future research would be to specifically explore two CMC tools: video-chat and texting. Discussion of these two tools revealed the greatest difference of opinions among the participants. It appeared that neither tool was offered with most distance education courses the participants had completed. Examining how video-chat and texting might impact student satisfaction, especially the students who are not self-directed learners, might help more students continue with online learning. Thus, these same students, who lack confidence, might be able to develop independent study skills needed to become more independent and motivated learners.

Future research might explore the types of learners who enroll in distance learning courses. Adult learners in my study were motivated to learn when they understood how a CMC tool would be useful after coursework was completed. However, even within this segment of learners there were students who were more independent and able to complete class work without much assistance while other adult learners desired more assistance.

As new CMC tools are developed, more research will be needed to address the needs of students and educators. The potential to make education viable for more people, no matter their location, is of global importance. Finding effective communication tools for use in education will not only benefit students and educators but will have far reaching effects for international economics and global relations.
Chapter Summary

Students involved in my research had various opinions about technology, but one common factor was if a tool helped them with studies, they wanted to learn it. Another opinion expressed by several participants was that if the tool was perceived as not enhancing the course materials, the adult learners did not want to use and resisted the technology.

Adult learners enrolled in online classes are not necessarily tech-savvy. However, those who participated in my research were open to learning new Computer-mediated Communication (CMC), tools if they were provided proper instructions for manipulation of that technology. In fact, some students expressed that they utilized some of the CMC tools initiated in coursework after the class concluded.

In my research findings, convenience was cited as the most prominent reason students opted for an online course. This finding was also found in previous research (Sloan Consortium, 2013; Stokes, 2006), however, because participants were passionate about their reasoning for pursuing online education, it merits inclusion in this research. The adult learners who participated in my research also expressed concern about busy schedules with location of the campus, family obligations such as errands and activities, and work hours being barriers to attending class in a face-to-face setting. These students wanted to be in school but could not physically always be on campus at required times. Online coursework allowed them to complete coursework in and around the multiple obligations they had in their lives.

Most of the adult learners in my study did not need to see the instructor to be comfortable with learning online. However, they expressed they would like immediacy with regular interactions and timely communications by the instructor. Students wanted to have reasonable
response times from online professors. When adult learners from my study desired more immediacy from instructors it was due to lack of regular interactions and long wait times after communication attempts. In addition to email communication, the majority of the participants in the study thought video-chat sounded like a great idea to communicate with professors and peers. However, when the opportunity arose to use video-chat, the students opted to use email because it was more convenient. Given such issues, it is important to note that satisfied adult learners who participated in my study did enjoy their education, found the value in online learning and were determined to finish their degree through such coursework.

The journey to study adult learners and the notions about how they accept or decline technology may add to new literature. Without technology we would not have online learning. My research explained that when adult students are given proper direction with how to use CMC tools, they were open and willing to try new methods of online communication. The adult learners from my study were not intimidated by technology; rather they just wanted to understand how it applied to the assignment and how the CMC tool might fit into their world post-education. The majority of the participants in this study enjoyed and wanted to learn new CMC tools.

These same adult learners value education and the richness it brings to their lives, with many students expressing how they appreciate school in their mature years more than when they were younger. Thus, while motivation to continue education can be blocked by negative self-concepts, inaccessibility of opportunity either from finances or educational offerings, or time constraints because of multiple priorities impeding the ability to study (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2011), distance education has the ability to reach adult learners, allowing them to develop new skills and enjoy education later in life.
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APPENDIX A

DISTANCE LEARNING SURVEY: CONSENT FORM
APPENDIX A

DISTANCE LEARNING SURVEY: CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the research project titled Adult Learners and Distance Learning being conducted by Shari Lendy, a graduate student at Northern Illinois University. I have been informed that the purpose of the study is to understand the feelings of adult learners as they engage in distance education.

I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following: complete an online survey and possibly participate in an online interview and/or journaling about my experience.

I am aware that my participation is voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time without penalty or prejudice, and that if I have any additional questions concerning this study, I may contact Shari Lendy at slendy@niu.edu or Rebecca Butler PhD at rbutler@niu.edu. I understand that if I wish further information regarding my rights as a research subject, I may contact the Office of Research Compliance at Northern Illinois University at (815) 753-8588.

I understand that the intended benefits of this study include furthering the body of research for distance education.

I have been informed that there are no foreseeable potential risks and/or discomforts. I understand that all information gathered during this experiment will be kept confidential by providing participants pseudonyms so their privacy will not be compromised.
I realize that Northern Illinois University policy does not provide for compensation for, nor does the university carry insurance to cover injury or illness incurred as a result of participation in university sponsored research projects.

I understand that my consent to participate in this project does not constitute a waiver of any legal rights or redress I might have as a result of my participation, and I acknowledge that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Agreeing to participate indicates that you are at least 30 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You may print a copy of this consent form.

If you wish to participate, please click “agree” below.

Do you consent to participate in this study?

□ Agree

□ Not Agree
APPENDIX B

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

DISTANCE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE SURVEY
APPENDIX B

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

DISTANCE EDUCATION EXPERIENCE SURVEY

1. How old are you?
   - 30-35
   - 36-40
   - 41-50
   - 51-60
   - 60+

2. What is your gender?
   - Male
   - Female

3. Are you working toward a degree? If so, please check the degree/level in which you are involved or have completed.
   - 2-year
   - Undergrad BA
   - Undergrad BS
   - MA
   - MBA
   - Doctorate
   - Other ________________

4. What is your occupation? ________________________________

5. Do you work full-time?
   - Yes
   - No

6. If you have a part-time job, do you have more than one part-time job?
   - Yes
   - No
7. How many hours a week do you work?
   □ 0-15
   □ 16-39
   □ 40-50
   □ 51-60
   □ 60+

8. Do you have children?
   □ Yes
   □ No

   If yes, how many children?
   □ 1
   □ 2
   □ 3-4
   □ 4+

   How old are your children? Check all that apply:
   □ 0-4 years old
   □ 5-10 years old
   □ 11-15 years old
   □ 16-18 years old
   □ 19-25 years old

9. Do you provide care for anyone else, like a parent, or relative?
   □ Yes
   □ No

   If yes, does this relative live with you?
   □ Yes
   □ No

10. Where do you live? (city, state, country) ________________________________

11. How many distance learning courses have you taken?
   □ 2
   □ 3
   □ 4
   □ 5
   □ 6
   □ 6+
12. What types of communication tools have you used with distance learning or blended courses?

- [ ] Email
- [ ] Blackboard or Moodle
- [ ] Cell phone
- [ ] Skype or video-conferencing
- [ ] Twitter
- [ ] Facebook or other social network
- [ ] Text-Messaging
- [ ] Land-line phone
- [ ] Wiki
- [ ] Blog
- [ ] Other (please specify) __________________

13. What is the most important element in distance learning course satisfaction?

- [ ] Instructor
- [ ] Peers
- [ ] Technology
- [ ] Course Design
- [ ] Work Load
- [ ] Communication
- [ ] Assignments

14. In the question above, is there a second element that you also feel strongly about?

15. What type of grade did you get in your favorite online/blended course?

16. What type of grade did you get in your least favorite online/blended course?

17. What is your preferred way to communicate with your instructor?

- [ ] Email
- [ ] Text-messaging
- [ ] Discussion Board
- [ ] Wiki
- [ ] Blog
- [ ] Social Network
- [ ] Other: _________________________

18. What is your preferred way to communicate with peers within a course?

- [ ] Email
- [ ] Text-messaging
- [ ] Discussion Board
- [ ] Wiki
- [ ] Blog
- [ ] Social Network
- [ ] Other: _________________________
19. What do you consider to be an appropriate response time from an instructor?

☐ 1- 4 hours
☐ 4 - 8 hours
☐ 8 – 24 hours
☐ 24 hours – 2 days
☐ 2-3 days
☐ 3-5 days

20. Would you be interested in participating in more research such as an interview or keeping a journal? Both of these would be online.

☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, then please provide your name and email.

Name___________________________________________

Email _________________________________________
APPENDIX C

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS
APPENDIX C
ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

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APPENDIX D

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE
APPENDIX D

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

INITIAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Does the selection of a communication tool create different types of perceptions among adult learners?
   a. How is traditional email perceived among adult learners?
   b. How is CMS, discussion boards, email perceived among adult learners?
   c. How are wikis or blogs perceived among adult learners?
   d. How is video-chat such as Skype perceived among adult learners?
   e. Have you ever used a micro-blog such as Twitter?

2. How important is it that the course has more than one mode of communication?
   a. Do adult learners feel they learned more when more than one mode of communication is used for a course?
   b. If adult learners do feel one communication tool is more useful, which one and why?
   c. Is there a communication tool they would have preferred to use and did not have the option?

3. How does response time affect the course satisfaction with distance learning?
   a. What is an appropriate response time for adult learners?
   b. What are the factors in perceiving response time?

4. How important is ease of use for new technology with adult learners?
   a. How might an instructor combat learning new technology perceived by adult learners?
   b. What types of assistance are provided to help with technology issues with adult learners?

5. Do you have any other obligations such as family, mortgage, rent, etc. along with your continuing education?

6. Do you have anything you would like to add to your comments about distance learning and your experience?
APPENDIX E

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

SECOND INTERVIEW GUIDE
APPENDIX E
ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:
SECOND INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Can you describe your experience with education; what your background is? For example, are you coming back to school, are you building on previous degrees, did you decide to come back to school after working for a period of time? What made you want to continue your education?

2. How did you decide to take an online course? What had you heard and from whom? How did you receive information about the course or how did it appeal to you?

3. What were the pros and cons of taking an online class? What did you know prior to taking an online class about the online experience?

4. What was your least favorite online experience?

5. What was your most favorite online experience?

6. What kinds of communication tools did you use in the online course? (email, texting, wikis, blogs, discussion boards, chat rooms, Google docs, social media, video chat, etc.) What are your thoughts about how these tools were used and would you want to use these tools again to interact while engaged online? How about personally in everyday life? Can you explain why?

7. What is your favorite communication tool used when engaged with online learning? Explain why?

8. What was your least favorite communication tool that you used when engaged with online learning? Explain why?
9. How did you prepare for an online class?

10. What was your instructor like? How often did you interact with your instructor?

11. What was most different for you when comparing the online course to a face-to-face course?

12. What was the most surprising element to the online class?

13. If you were to take an online course again, what would you look for as an attractive feature for the course? How would you select your next online course?

14. How would you compare your online instructor to your face-to-face instructor? Were there differences besides the fact that you did not see him/her? How did your instructor make you feel about online learning?

15. How would you prepare a peer to be successful for an online experience? What would you tell them? Was there something you wished you would have known prior to this experience?

16. Who would you recommend take an online class?
APPENDIX F

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

JOURNALING GUIDE
APPENDIX F

ADULT LEARNER PARTICIPANT:

JOURNALING GUIDE

1. Explain a little bit about your education background; For example, are you building on a degree, coming back to school after taking a break, choosing a different career path?

2. Why did you decide to take an online course; was it something you heard about the course, instructor, or something else entirely?

3. What assignment brought you the most challenges online? Please describe the assignment. What was it about this assignment that made it challenging for you? Do you have any suggestions for how the assignment could have been changed? Why?

4. What was your most favorite assignment online? Why did you enjoy it so much? How did you complete the assignment; did you do anything special?

5. What steps did you take to complete the online assignment? Were these steps different from those used for a traditional face-to-face setting?

6. Would you take an online class again? Why or why not? How would you prepare somebody you know to be ready for an online course?

7. How would you/would you change your online experience? What did you enjoy the most about your online course? What did you enjoy the least with the online course? Please describe.