EXAMINING STUDENT SATISFACTION OF INTERACTION IN ONLINE LEARNING: ANALYZING STUDENT SATISFACTION USING THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

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This qualitative study explored the experiences of an online learner at a community college. The purpose of the study was to investigate community college students’ perception of online courses through an examination of their experiences with online learning. The community of inquiry theory was used as a guide to better understand the importance of student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction in online learning. The experiences of 15 community college students, who had completed an online course at a Midwestern community college, were examined to determine levels of interaction and presence. A focus group was interviewed and used for additional research into the examination of community college online learners. Finally, artifacts were collected and analyzed. The artifacts included essay assignments, syllabi, chapter questions, a research paper and discussion boards. The data collected provided three major findings. The first was that community college students enrolled in online courses had both positive and negative experiences. The second finding was that students preferred taking classes face-to-face rather than online and third, students placed greater importance on student-teacher interaction. The role of the teacher emerged as a pivotal component in the overall satisfaction of online courses.
These findings suggest that future research could be done to further examine the design of an effective online course and the training for online teachers.
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OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

BY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Online learning has emerged as a preferred modality for students in higher education for a number of reasons, including its emphasis on flexible scheduling and self-directed learning (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006). The amount of research regarding students’ perception of online learning has increased over the last decade due to the notion that if a student is satisfied with their online learning experience, the student is more likely to complete the online course and register for more. This would, in turn, lead to higher retention and completion rates in online courses (Zhu, 2012).

Community colleges are particularly vital to this research due to the fact that approximately 96% of all community colleges now offer online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The number of students enrolled in an online course at a community colleges increased by 41,000 students from 2012 to 2013 and increased as much as 97.4% from 2005-2012 (Illinois Community College Board, 2013). The number of students who enrolled in online courses in all public institutions of higher learning, including 4-year universities, totaled over 166,000 students from 2012 to 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Due to the fact that student satisfaction is tied closely to the success of an online student, future research must explore
student satisfaction in online learning in order to support the assertion that “student satisfaction with online learning is essential for the learning to be successful” (Samman, Omar, Belmasrour, & Alijani, 2013, p. 36).

There is a need for quality in the design of an online course including making curriculum content relevant to the real world, increasing training for teachers to account for different learning styles, and increasing teacher readiness for online teaching by requiring enrollment in online courses before an online course is assigned to the teacher (Samman et al., 2013). Satisfaction with an online course has been shown to contribute to lowering the withdrawal rates that currently plague online classes (Samman et al., 2013). The withdrawal rates of online courses offered at Illinois community colleges surpassed face-to-face courses by almost 20% (Illinois Community College Board, 2013). There are many factors contributing to students’ satisfaction including barriers, intrinsic and extrinsic factors.

Community colleges have attempted to keep up with the steady demand for online courses due to the fact that there is a trend leading to online course offerings outnumbering face-to-face courses (Jaggars, 2014). Barriers to academic success for community college students include external factors such as low socioeconomic status and lack of family/financial support (Fike, McCall, Raehl, Smith, & Lockman, 2009; Illinois Community College Board, 2013).

Muilenburg and Berge (2005) contended that additional barriers exist for the community college student which included apprehension to taking online courses, past negative experience with online courses, lack of teacher support, isolation, and learner motivation. Some online student related their satisfaction with online courses to extrinsic factors such as teacher support and collaborative assignments. However, satisfaction was determined by
intrinsic factors such as learner enjoyment and motivation, which research has shown can contribute to a student’s likelihood to take more online courses (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

Anderson (2008) asserted that factors such as teacher interaction, collaborative group projects, and student interest in course content are three aspects to consider when determining student satisfaction with online courses. Research has shown that an academically sound online course might include the three previously mentioned items in its course design as a means to promote two important concepts. These concepts are (a) establishing community through collaborative learning and (b) constructivist learning (Gold, 2001; Huang, 2002).

Constructivist learning is based on Vygotsky’s (1978) and Dewey’s (1916) beliefs that knowledge can be constructed by applying new information to previously learned information in order to create a broader view of the world. This theory asserts that the information that is gained from previous experiences is then applied to current situations and shared with others. This allows the learner to gain knowledge from the experience as well as from the interaction between participants (Vygotsky, 1978). Dewey (1916) believed that collaboration can effectively lead to a construction of meaning and can be achieved through assigning group projects.

Vygotsky (1978), a scientist whose theories were linked to the tenets of constructivism, believed in the importance of interaction and learning through others. Vygotsky (1978) stated that we truly learn through social interaction as well as interaction with our culture. Anderson and Dron (2010) confirmed the research of Vygotsky (1978) and Dewey (1916) when they stated the idea that, in constructivist learning, the teacher becomes a facilitator of knowledge and encourages knowledge to be built upon social interaction, actively seeking new knowledge and constructing new learning by situating it in past learning ideas.
Problem Statement

Roberts and Styron (2009) stated that online courses have lower retention and completion rates when compared to face-to-face classes. A body of literature examined student satisfaction with online learning and revealed factors that successful online courses should contain (Dziuban, Moskal, Kramer, & Thompson, 2013; Friedman & Friedman, 2011; Lee & Rha, 2009; Samman et al., 2013; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Zhu, 2012). Most of the research regarding these factors involved 4-year universities and not community colleges. After having exhausted the research seeking information regarding community college students and online learning, it is apparent that there is a dearth of qualitative research exploring the experiences of community college students with online learning.

Stanford-Bowers (2008) found that one of the factors that should be present in an online course is community. Community can be established in an online course through various methods including (a) focused content interaction, (b) involved and timely teacher interaction, and (c) collaboration with other students through social interaction. When community is integrated into the online course through one or all of these ways, the result can be higher student satisfaction with the online course (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

A working definition of student satisfaction in online courses is defined as students who feel comfortable with the course and its environment, which can result in higher levels of satisfaction (Baxter, 2012). Another factor to consider when designing an online course includes activities that can promote the online student to intrinsically link feelings of success to the online course (Dziuban et al., 2013). This can be accomplished through positive feedback and encouragement from the online teacher (Lee & Rha, 2009).
Baxter (2012) stated that there are items to consider when designing and teaching an online course. These items include (a) building relationships to ease student transition to university and enhance the sense of belonging, (b) use of social networking tools such as Facebook to help social and academic integration, (c) forming early strong interpersonal relationships between staff, students and their peers, (d) working closely with students to identify how they can support each other to prosper and succeed at university, (e) reducing factors that make students doubt, (f) increasing factors that make students want to stay, and (g) building communication between families and students.

Zhu (2012) found that in addition to creating collaborative projects to encourage social interaction, establishing relationships between the teacher and the student should be promoted. Online learning, in particular, has stressed the importance of establishing a connection between the student and the teacher as a method of avoiding an isolated feeling that would occur when a student feels out of the loop, which can result in negative feelings (Samman et al., 2013). Negative feelings toward online learning can be the result of inadequate course design or a lack of teacher commitment to the online course (Anderson, 2008; Moore, 1989).

Furthermore, Friedman and Friedman (2011) revealed that if the online course can connect course content to the student’s actual real life experiences, the student is more likely to feel satisfied with the online course. The relevancy of the subject matter to the student’s own life that was established in the online course was shown to influence the amount of satisfaction the student felt as a result of taking the course (Samman et al., 2013). Research stated that this could be achieved when a teacher included links to other internet sites or supplemental reading material. The student would be able to expand their scope of learning to include outside
readings to connect their real life to the content of the course (Anderson, 2008; Lee & Rha, 2009).

Because community colleges suffer from higher attrition rates in online courses compared to 4-year universities, the need to study community college student satisfaction with online learning is imperative (Friedman & Friedman, 2011; Gradel & Edson, 2010; Samman et al., 2013). Furthermore, there is a need to analyze the perceptions of community college students, who have participated in online courses, as a means to determine satisfaction of online courses (Friedman & Friedman, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate community college students’ perception of online courses through an examination of their experiences with online learning. The goal was to gain insight from the research through discussion of student perception of online courses. This was done in order to better understand the community college student insight related to student satisfaction of online learning. While there was sufficient research concerning students in 4-year universities and their perceptions of online learning, there existed a lack of research regarding the perception of online learning from a community college students’ viewpoint. Attention throughout this research study was paid to community college students’ perception of online learning, community college students as a general population of learners, and interaction as a possible factor in student satisfaction with online courses.

In summary, online learning holds a prominent place in community colleges; therefore, the focus should be on making online course design effective (Shea & Bidjerano, 2013). This can be done through an investigation of community college students’ online learning
satisfaction. The need to analyze and determine the satisfaction and perception of online learners is significant (Dziuban et al., 2013). This study adds to the literature regarding student satisfaction with online courses through the perspective of the community college student.

The research questions that guided this study were developed with the primary research question of what are the participants’ experiences of online learning?
RQ1: How do community college students, who have participated in online courses, describe their online learning experience?
RQ2: What are the community college students’ perceptions of online learning when compared to face-to-face learning?
RQ3: How do community college students describe their personal satisfaction with an online course in terms of (a) interaction with the teacher, (b) interaction with other students in an online course, and (c) interaction with the content or subject of the course?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used in this study included the community of inquiry theory, the interaction theory and the constructivist theory. When approaching the topic of community college student satisfaction with online learning, the community of inquiry theory indicated that interaction is a key factor in achieving success in an online course (Sher, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the concept of interaction in online courses considered such elements as teacher interaction, social interaction and content interaction. In addition to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) community of inquiry theory, Moore’s (1989) interaction theory was integrated to further understand interaction in online courses. Finally, the constructivist theory was used as a theoretical perspective in regards to course design.
Akyol and Garrison (2008) established the importance of community in online learning to promote interaction. The community of inquiry theory placed focus on the interaction that may contribute to satisfaction with the online educational experience (Akyol & Garrison, 2010). The community of inquiry theory was designed with the philosophical approach of the constructivist theory to learning, specifically, the importance of the social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) stressed the important learning elements, such as developing community, by focusing on cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence. The overall objective of the community of inquiry theory was to invoke a curious nature in the student to explore and investigate learning through interaction (Garrison et al., 2010). The community of inquiry theory stated that “students must think about and process the activity, not simply replicate an action, in order for learning to take place” (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004, p. 144).

Data from various sources including semi-structured interviews, focus groups and artifact collection was triangulated to guide and shape this study. The three types of interaction, including student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and student-content interaction, emerged as the basis of this research to uncover student satisfaction with online learning (Moore, 1989). Finally, the community of inquiry theory designed by Garrison et al. (2000) provided a contextual understanding of the connectedness between the various types of interaction and community college student satisfaction.
Significance of Study

Online learning at community colleges is an evolving area of research in the field of education and student learning. Further research is warranted in two other areas in regards to online student satisfaction, including (a) the role the administration of the college plays in determining online course design and online course quality assurance and (b) the teachers who are teaching the online courses. It is my opinion that the experience of the online community college student and the information collected through qualitative research including interviews and focus groups, provided the most telling and substantial data regarding online learning. Therefore, without student input into the process of course design and lived online experiences, the research would be lacking a critical voice for the future of online courses. Subsequently, without the solicitation of student feedback in regards to satisfaction with online learning, there could not be constructive improvement.

This study will explore factors leading to satisfaction with the anticipation that retention and completion rates will increase. The lower retention and completion rates for online courses was attributed to several reasons including the fact that many online courses are taught at community colleges where students are not as academically and technologically prepared as 4-year university students (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). Another reason may be teachers who are not prepared or taught how to teach online and do not give timely feedback or do not provide clear communication about expectations (Jaggars, 2014).

Finally, examining student satisfaction constructs has served as predictors of student satisfaction with online courses. This is essential to creating an effective and successful online learning environment (Sahin & Shelley, 2008). Students viewed the online course as desirable
as it allowed them to stay at home as well as complete their coursework at their own pace (Ascough, 2007). Diverse groups of community college students, such as part-time students and displaced workers, described the benefits of online learning (Park & Choi, 2009). Community college students strive to find a balance between taking online classes for the efficiency and face-to-face classes for the fulfillment (Tsai, 2012).

Setting

Rock Valley College is a Midwestern community college located in Rockford, Illinois and serves approximately 8,000 students. In spring of 2015, there were 1,105 students who enrolled in online courses at the college (RVC Office of Institutional Research, 2015). The retention rate of these students was 71.4% compared to the 77% of face-to-face students. This may not seem alarming; however, there were over 7,000 students taking face-to-face courses, which left a much higher margin of incompletion. The college is made up of 42% full-time students and 58% part-time students. There are approximately 157 full-time faculty members and 89 part-time or adjunct faculty members. Adjunct members are not allowed to teach online or hybrid courses and are assigned no more than two classes per semester. Therefore, this study analyzed online courses that were only taught by full-time faculty members.

Rock Valley College recently received accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission of Illinois to offer a full associates degree completely online. This led to a demand for more online courses to be offered and it is because of the increased demand for more online courses, the retention number dropped further (RVC Office of Institutional Research, 2015). Student satisfaction was routinely gauged by student surveys administered to students through the online learning management system or Canvas, at the end of each semester. This measured
factors such as timely teacher feedback, professionalism of the teacher and knowledge gained by the student during the semester. These surveys were the only efforts to gauge student satisfaction with online courses at Rock Valley College and there are no student satisfaction surveys specifically measuring student satisfaction with online courses (RVC Office of Institutional Research, 2015).

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Rock Valley College has had three learning management systems (LMS), which can be defined as “a software application for the administration, documentation, tracking, reporting, and delivery of electronic educational technology education courses or training programs” (Conde, García-Peñalvo, Rodríguez-Conde, Alier, Casany, & Piguillem, 2014, p. 191).

The first was titled EdNet, which was an LMS that was designed for K-12 use but was adopted by RVC because of its versatility and ease of use by the online teacher and online students. The second LMS used by Rock Valley College (RVC) was Angel, which was owned by Blackboard, a leading LMS administrator. After the technical support was dropped by Angel, the college adopted Canvas which is the current LMS used at the college. Canvas has been used by Rock Valley College since 2010 and has been renamed Eagle, which represents both the mascot of Rock Valley College and is an acronym for Electronic Advanced Group Learning Environment.

Definition of Terms

Asynchronous learning classroom: The lesson is presented and is posted in the online classroom and can be completed by a stated deadline without every member of the course being
logged on or signed into the classroom at the same time (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2013).

Community learning: This type of learning approach emphasizes teacher-to-student interaction as well as student-to-student interaction throughout the learning process (Akyol & Garrison, 2010).

Course completion: When a student is registered for a course in a higher educational institution and completes the course and receives a passing grade for their effort (Boston et al., 2011).

Full-time student: A full-time student is a Rock Valley College student who is enrolled in at least 12 credit hours within a given term (RVC Office of Institutional Research, 2015).

Part-time student: A part-time Rock Valley College student is a student who is enrolled in less than 12 credit hours in any given term (RVC Office of Institutional Research, 2015).

Retention: A student who is able to be retained in the college long enough to complete a degree or certificate (Boston et al., 2011).

Synchronous learning classroom: The learning material presented is in real time with everyone in the course being logged on or signed into the online classroom at the same time (Simonson et al., 2013).

Definitions of course delivery

The following definitions of the various modalities of course delivery are a result of consultation of the researcher along with (a) the Program Coordinator of the ION program at University of Illinois, Scott Johnson, (b) Rock Valley College’s Academy of Teaching and Learning and, (c) (Simonson et al., 2013).
Face-to-face class: A complete face-to-face class only meets face-to-face and does not include any online learning assignments, quizzes or discussion boards. The teacher may choose to utilize the gradebook online. The only delivery of information is given face-to-face.

Online class: An online class is one that may have occasional visits to campus but utilizes online learning as the primary source of receiving content, posting assignments, taking quizzes and tests and receiving lecture and course notes. At least 80% of the primary delivery of information is online.

Hybrid class: A hybrid class is a class that has altered the meeting times from a traditional face-to-face meet class. Visits to campus are more frequent when compared to an online class and online learning is more frequent when compared to a blended class. While there may be substantial online participation, there are also significant face-to-face meetings. The primary delivery of information is split between online and face-to-face. Percentages can vary; however, most agree that 50% of the class should be online. This is defined as online instruction combined with face-to-face meetings in equal proportions.

Blended class: The blended class is a face-to-face class enhanced with online learning assignments, quizzes/tests or discussion boards. Grades may be posted in the online classroom and papers may be expected to be posted online rather than given face-to-face. The primary delivery of information is face-to-face. Percentages of face-to-face meetings and online assignments are varied. Typically this is defined as a face-to-face class with some online instruction added.
Summary

Chapter one provided the problem statement and reason for research into the satisfaction of community college students in online courses, the purpose of the study, the conceptual framework to be used in the study and the significance of the study. The setting of the study and a definition of terms used in the study were included in this chapter. Chapter two presents a comprehensive literature review of online learning, the community of inquiry theory, the interaction theory and, lastly, community colleges, community college student, and an overview of online learning.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Organization of Literature

This literature review is divided into three categories including online learning, community of inquiry theory, and community colleges. Specifically, the history of community colleges, the current overview of community colleges, a profile of a community college online student, and finally, the current overview of community colleges and online learning will be discussed. This is to provide a comprehensive overview of these areas in order to have a conceptual understanding of the literature. The first section discusses the current overview of online learning and student perception of online learning as a way to establish a general sense of how students feel about online learning and their experiences with online courses.

The next section examines the community of inquiry theory and the role that interaction has in online learning. Included in this section is a discussion about the constructivist approach to online course design. Finally, the third section gives an overview of community colleges in the United States and then focuses on community college students and their experiences with online learning. Persistence and retention rates are examined in the context of community college online courses. The intent of this literature review is to explore student experiences by conducting an in-depth review of online learning to provide a foundation to contextualize the purpose of this study.
Online learning is now offered at most higher education institutions around the world (Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, & Long, 2012) and has assumed an important role at colleges and universities with 70.8% of chief academic officers reporting that “online learning is critical to their long-term strategy” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 4). Learning management systems such as Blackboard are being utilized by teachers who only teach face-to-face as a means to incorporate online learning assignments in every course (Bacow et al., 2012).

There are many definitions for the various types of course delivery including face-to-face, blended, hybrid, and online. First, face-to-face is defined as 80% of the class material is taught face-to-face. The next course delivery type is blended and is defined as a class that is mainly taught face-to-face with assignments and activities posted online. Hybrid courses, for the purpose of this study, are defined as a combination of online and face-to-face learning. The format for hybrid classes is 50% of class information and assignments are online and 50% of class information and assignments are delivered face-to-face. Finally, online courses are defined as a course that delivers the majority, at least 80%, of class information or assignments online (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

There is the concept of synchronous delivery and asynchronous delivery. Synchronous delivery is defined as lessons that are taught at a specific time where everyone is online and can communicate to one another via cameras, microphones, or chat sessions (Bacow, 2012). Synchronous delivery is when the learning material is presented in real time with everyone in the course being logged on or signed into the online classroom at the same time (Simonson et al., 2013).
There is a difference between synchronous delivery and asynchronous delivery. In contrast to synchronous delivery, asynchronous delivery is defined as the lesson being presented and posted in the online classroom. Assignments, lectures, and activities can be completed by a stated deadline without every member of the course being logged on or signed into the classroom at the same time (Simonson et al., 2013). For the purpose of this study, the type of online learning that will be analyzed will be asynchronous delivery due to the fact that synchronous delivery is not yet available at Rock Valley College. In addition, completely online courses, or classes that are defined as a course where at least 80% of classroom material is learned, delivered, and discussed in an online forum, will be the type of online course analyzed (Simonson et al., 2013).

Allen and Seaman (2015) stated that 34.5% of higher education institutions offered a complete degree online in 2002. In 2012, 62.4% of higher education institutions offered a complete online degree. One reason for the increase could be community colleges forging ahead with the implementation of full degrees offered online (Piña, 2010). Crawford-Ferre and Wiest (2012) reported that “successful online instruction requires new methods of course design” (p. 12) which encourages interaction among course participants, and includes teacher preparation and support.

Online learning has increased in popularity and demand over the last ten years (Allen & Seaman, 2015). There is now a much greater need to investigate the satisfaction level of the student, particularly the community college online student (Jackson, Jones, & Rodriguez, 2010). By analyzing the data from the analysis, online course teachers can gain insight into course design to meet students’ needs. This may contribute to a higher probability of increasing
student satisfaction as well as increase retention rates (Pillay, Irving, & McCrindle, 2006).

Next, students’ perceptions of online learning will be examined.

**Student Perception of Online Learning**

Online learning has been researched from the point of view of a student who has successfully completed an online course; therefore, the results may be a bit skewed due to the fact that completion can signify satisfaction with the course delivery (Baxter, 2012). In surveys conducted with students who have completed an online course, many found that the satisfaction level of an online student varied for a number of reasons including course content, teacher involvement and student preparedness. Another factor contributing to student satisfaction with online courses was the structure of the course, or lack thereof (Baxter, 2012).

Others argued that the learning style of the student as well as personality type, such as being an extrovert, contributed to the success with online courses (Battalio, 2009). For example, reflective learners or students who interacted more online, and excelled with self-direction, were found to have higher satisfaction levels when compared to those who were withdrawn (Battalio, 2009). The student who enrolled in an online course to purposely become isolated from the rest of the class is disappointed to find a world of interaction and collaboration in an online class (Baxter, 2012). On the other hand, isolation may be a contributor to the student’s success in online learning due to the fact that a student who desires an environment in which they may work alone will appreciate the isolation factor. On the other hand, this may prove to be a detriment when feelings of isolation and inaccessibility to the teacher contribute to dissatisfaction with online learning (Baxter, 2012).
Kuo, Walker, Schroder, and Belland (2014) uncovered a list of factors that can be relevant to student satisfaction such as course quality and student persistence. It has been found that the higher the student satisfaction, the higher the retention rate (Kuo et al., 2014; Zhu, 2012). However, online learning is still a relatively new type of course delivery and demands an evaluation of its effectiveness to ensure its continuation (Zhu, 2012). Online learning has become the new normal in higher education, in that, most students enrolled in colleges and universities are taking online courses and expect online offerings in every discipline (Dziuban et al., 2013, p. 1).

While course satisfaction may not be easily measured, a relationship between student satisfaction with an online course and final grades has been researched (Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis, & Lopez, 2011). Many students taking online courses attributed satisfaction to course content as well as teacher involvement and interaction, including feedback (Lee et al., 2011). When gauging student satisfaction, there are many factors to consider, such as experience with online courses, experience with mediated communication, and design of course (Dziuban et al., 2013; Lim, 2001).

From these three factors, Kuo, Walker, Belland, and Schroder (2013) expanded the definition of student satisfaction. First, in regards to experience with online courses, a student will narrate their experiences with online learning positively based on the fact that they have learned to be self-directed learners and can function in an online setting with success. Next, experience with the internet and mediated communication can directly lead to online student satisfaction because online courses are dependent on the internet to deliver the content and provide a forum to learn.
Lastly, the inclusion of interaction in the design of the course, including student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction, and student-content interaction, can result in a “positive influence on student satisfaction” (Kuo et al., 2013, p. 18). There is limited research in the area of community college student perceptions of online courses. This lack of information contributed to the fact that little had been examined in the field of community college students and their satisfaction with online learning. Next, the community of inquiry will be examined.

Community of inquiry theory

The basis of Garrison et al. (2000) community of inquiry theory states that a question, case, or problem posed in the classroom begins with the teacher serving as a guide or facilitator rather than a depositor of information (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). As the facilitator, the online teacher must guide the class and recognize the difference between leading the discussion in the online classroom and dragging the students along in an unproductive attempt to develop the student’s insight into the problem (Vogel-Walcutt, Gebrim, Bowers, Carper, & Nicholson, 2011). By definition, leading a conversation incorporates critical thinking, which means the teacher would allow the student to think for themselves in order to come to a conclusion. In contrast to leading is dragging, which is defined as the teacher asking very little from the student in regards to reflecting or thinking critically.

The overall objective in the community of inquiry theory was to invoke a curious nature in the student to explore and investigate reasoning on their own (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). The model was designed to include core items to address important learning elements such as developing community and pursuit of knowledge by focusing on cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence (Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009).
Online learning offers the educator an opportunity to explore various philosophical and educational theories and choose the method that works best for them. Quite simply, traditional learning requires that the educator hold an amount of power over the student through assignment requirements and information exchange (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008). Online learning forces the educator to design a course in which the student is a self-directed learner. This allows a collaborative approach rather than a power struggle between teacher and student (Hosie, Schibeci, & Backus, 2005).

An online course should be designed to make up for the loss of physical and verbal interaction that is present in a face-to-face class (Gulati, 2008). According to Ascough (2007) there are three major components to consider as one establishes community. The three major components are social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Cognitive presence allows the students to interact within the group and form meanings based on that interaction. Social presence is defined as “the degree of awareness of another person in an interaction and the consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship” (Ascough, 2007, p. 133). Finally, Ascough (2007) defines teaching presence as the “design and facilitation of the learning sequence” (p. 134) as well as establishing the atmosphere or culture of a classroom.

Because a student is constructing meaning from experiences from interacting socially, the concept of community, as it is integrated into online learning, makes sense (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006). Furthermore, integrating an individual’s experience with others as an educational theory mirrors John Dewey’s belief that an individual is dependent on the social interaction of those around them (Swan et al., 2009). Online learning has attempted to establish community in courses by assigning discussion boards or synchronous class sessions. Garrison (2007)
developed a community of inquiry theory framework to demonstrate a collaborative, constructivist approach to online learning.

Critical reflection is a core component of constructivist learning, in that, constructivist learning promotes the understanding that knowledge is formed by being actively involved in the process (Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2011). The process of learning and knowledge building, as defined by a constructivist approach, must have a reflective piece in which the student reflects on the learning process. The student may write about it in a journal or post to a discussion board. Finally, the integration of prior knowledge is encouraged so that the student may begin to see themes and similarities to past experiences so that construction of a knowledge base may emerge (Vogel-Walcutt et al., 2011).

The community of inquiry theory speculates that social interaction and reflection can lead to a deeper understanding of the learning experience (Garrison et al., 2000). The next section will examine and analyze interaction in online learning including interaction between the student and other students, interaction between the student and the teacher, and finally, interaction between the student and the subject matter or content of the course.

**Interaction in Online Learning**

The community of inquiry theory theorizes that that are three areas of interaction to consider in online learning. The three interactions are (a) interaction between the student and the teacher, (b) interaction between the student and other students, and (c) interaction between the student the content of the course (Garrison et al., 2000). Research has shown that “interaction has long been identified as a defining and critical component of the educational process” (Murray, Pérez, Geist, & Hedrick, 2012, p. 127).
Moore (1989) furthered the research by dividing interaction into three categories, which are student-student interaction, student-teacher interaction, and student-content interaction. Student-student interaction, as defined by Moore (1989), is the collaboration and interaction that occurs between students, either one-to-one or in a group setting. Student-teacher interaction can be defined as the interaction that occurs between the teacher and the student through feedback and detailed instructions (Moore, 1989; Sher, 2009). Lastly, Moore (1989) defined student-content interaction as the integration of course material and content to change the learner’s perception or understanding about the material. Increasing interaction between other students, the teacher, and the course content is the key to lowering the attrition rates of students taking online courses (Park & Choi, 2009).

The importance of interaction in an online course cannot be overlooked as an integral piece to course design. Heyman (2010) listed three areas that students identified as the most important to consider when designing an online course. The three areas were student connection with the institution, interaction between the teacher and other student, and finally, student self-discipline (Heyman, 2010).

Teacher Presence in Online Learning

Teacher presence is defined as the online teacher’s role in the virtual classroom which includes but is not limited to: (a) design and preparation of the course, (b) facilitation and instruction of assignments, (c) interaction among group participants, and (d) encouragement of interaction between participants (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). Garrison (2007) found that teacher presence is a rapidly expanding area of importance due to its contribution to a successful design of the online course. Even a well-designed, well-facilitated course can have
students who simply cannot succeed. The conscious and committed effort from the online teacher has proven noteworthy of effective course design (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012). Sher (2009) found that it was the perspective of the online student that determined effectiveness of online teaching and that most students ranked teacher interaction as a critical determinant of a successful online experience.

One reason for substandard course design may be the lack of interest in teaching online. Crawford-Ferre and Wiest (2012) stated that teachers are less likely to participate in online teaching “due to a perceived unsettled nature of pedagogy for distance learning efforts” (p. 11). Unfortunately for those teachers, 70.8% of higher education institutions believe that online education is critical to the long-term strategy of higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2015). The role of teacher as facilitator is outlined and emphasizes avoiding authoritarianism and disrespect which could alter the tone of the classroom resulting in decreased participation (Ascough, 2007).

Ascough (2007) outlined guidelines for novice online educators. The first guideline was “instructor visibility” (p. 133). This is a concept where the educator is online, encouraging participation and offering feedback, but not dominating the conversation. The second guideline Ascough (2007) recommended is the inclusion of discussion forums. Discussion forums should be established in the virtual classroom to allow for informal conversations and promote connectedness.

Interaction between students, teacher, and content can develop when “participants recognize their shared goals and responsibilities and commit to working toward realization of those goals” (Stanford-Bowers, 2008, p. 39). Making the transition from educating in a traditional setting to an online environment involves adopting a new attitude regarding the
functionality of online instruction. Various means of information delivery may depend on the content of the course; however, it is still crucial for the teacher to establish an environment in which students feel welcome to actively participate (Ascough, 2007).

Simply stated, a psychology course may find that teacher as facilitator is more feasible when compared to a math course. Even so, every online teacher can work toward an inclusive and collaborative online experience. Phelan (2012) revealed that “the most fundamental metacriterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try to get inside a student’s head and see classroom and learning from their point of view” (p. 42).

**Cognitive Presence in Online Learning**

Cognitive presence, as defined by Akyol and Garrison (2010), is the student’s connection to the course content. Akyol and Garrison (2010) found that online students experienced deep or surface learning of course content. Deep learning occurred when the student applied deep approaches to learning the content of the course and surface learning was characterized as repetitive, such as memorization of facts or dates (Akyol & Garrison, 2010). The research was based upon the research conducted by Garrison et al. (2000), who theorized that deep learning can only take place with practical inquiry. Practical inquiry includes four phases including (a) triggering event, (b) exploration, (c) integration, and (d) resolution.

In the triggering event phase, an activity or problem is given to the student to process and engage problem-solving skills to resolve the issue. The exploration phase focuses on understanding the scope of the problem through research and critical thinking skills. Next, the integration phase is a more focused stage where there is a construction of meaning that will
lead to the final phase, the resolution phase, where a specific solution is determined (Akyol & Garrison, 2010). Cognitive presence involved a deeper understanding and learning rather than a memorization of facts and information (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011).

Baran et al. (2011) identified the significance of student-content interaction as a key indicator to the success and satisfaction of the student. Therefore, “the engagement of students in an online course is especially important because without intentional engagement of students, little, if any, learning will take place” (Samman et al., 2013, p. 43). Course content mandated by the department may have little room for modification; however, the more the student feels connected with the resources and materials presented in class, the higher chance the student will be successful (Murray et al., 2012).

With the advances made to Learning Management Systems (LMS), there are new opportunities to present information in dynamic methods rather than simply posting assignments and lectures online, such as videos and links to outside websites (Murray et al., 2012). Gradel and Edson (2010) stated that there were various ways a teacher could involve the student with course content such as the inclusion of activities, scenarios that invoke dialogue between students.

Designing an online course entails a conscious effort from the educator to release past practice and established behavior. Moller et al. (2008, p. 67) found that a teacher who designs the online course based on a face-to-face class is taking the craft approach or using materials and assignments used in the traditional classroom and attempting to put them on the web. This approach is not only ineffective for the online classroom but is more time consuming as the teacher records, types, and posts a semester worth of lecture and assignments.
Effectively designing an online course should include assignments that “foster reflection, collaboration, self-directed learning, and meaningful assessment” (Hosie et al., 2005, p. 549). In an online learning class, the main difference is the learning experience changes from being in a classroom with a teacher and other students to being alone online. Online learning is based on the assumption that the student will be in control of the learning process.

Understanding his or her cognitive development is a critical component of online learning as it directly contributes to self-directed learning (Ural, 2007). Subsequently, the role of the teacher becomes less of an information giver and more of a facilitator of learning (Ascough, 2007).

Other ideas to incorporate an informal approach to course content is to lay out the information in modules to prevent an overload of material and to include visual supplements such as pictures or graphs (Lee & Rha, 2009). Lastly, the interactivity of student to content is improved if the student is directly involved in the planning of the course and is allowed to give feedback as the course progresses based on their perception of learning (Friedman & Friedman, 2011). The constructivist theory is next examined as an approach to use in the design of an online class.

**Constructivist Approach to Course Design**

When applying the community of inquiry theory, the focus is placed on the dynamics that improve the educational experience and learning outcome of the online student (Akyol & Garrison, 2010). Garrison et al. (2000) designed this philosophical approach by using the constructivist theory to learning, specifically the importance of the social, cognitive, and teaching presence. The model was designed to include core items to address important learning
elements such as developing community as well as pursuit of knowledge by focusing on cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence (Swan et al., 2009).

Based on the approach to establish a need for knowledge construction through interaction, online learning uses the constructivist theory as a conceptual framework. The constructivist theory is “based on the assumption that individuals learn to construct their knowledge and meanings through interaction with others” (Alkharusi, Kazem, & Al-Musawai, 2010, p. 101). An important factor to consider when determining online student satisfaction is how well they fit into an institution and their feelings of connectedness (Rovai & Downey, 2010). Ruey (2010) found that “constructivist learning emphasizes the impact of constructed knowledge through interaction and is based on the individual’s active, reflective thinking” (p. 707).

By using the constructivist theory as a model to design an online course, educators place emphasis on the notion that “learning is socially situated with members actively participating,” (Ruey, 2010, p. 707). Freitas, Rebolledo, Liarokapis, Magoulas, and Poulavassilis (2009) asserted the belief that constructivist theory emphasized that “knowledge is constructed by building on previous experiences and social interaction” (p. 69).

The goal of an online class, from a constructivist theoretical perspective, involves creating in-depth discussions, as well as having a learning environment that is socially meaningful (Erdem, Pala, & Bas, 2013). In order to engage the student in a constructivist approach to online course design, one must first consider the importance of interactive assignments. Second, the online teacher must allow for facilitation of information rather than simply being an information provider, more as a guide who helps the individual learn the material (Erdem et al., 2013). In doing so, the teacher poses questions as a way to get students
to critically think. This enables the student to discover knowledge on their own rather than deposit information for them to remember (Schell & Janicki, 2013).

Furthermore, research has shown that integrating an individual’s experience with others in the class, mirrors John Dewey’s belief that an individual is dependent on the social interaction of those around them (Gold, 2001; Huang, 2002; Kerr et al., 2006). Specifically, his philosophy of education in that “inquiry and community were at the core of educational experiences” (Swan et al., 2009, p. 3). Dewey believed that collaboration would effectively lead to a meaningful construction of meaning, which is, essentially, the definition of a constructivist approach to teaching (Dewey, 1916).

Park and Choi (2009) claimed that dissatisfaction with online learning is a direct result of the online student’s experience in regards to “the interactions between a student and his/her educational environment during the student’s stay in a program or course” (p. 208). Active dialogue and socialization were key elements to the success of following the constructivist theory and depended on the emergence of knowledge from others (Alkharusi et al., 2010).

Constructivist learning theory rests more on the social role of a learner. Constructivist theorists would argue that the individual experience is less important than the ability to construct knowledge by interacting socially and sharing problems (Dewey, 1916; Vygotsky, 1978). Online learning provides a means to link the two concepts so that an individual’s experience becomes the basis of the dialogue. The underlying assumption is that constructivist theory asserts that interaction and dialogue fosters the ability to learn by constructing meaning from others, as well as from society (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007).

Gulati (2008) claimed that the constructivist theory is necessary for “developing learner-centered strategies” and an essential part of online instruction (p. 184). Students who
are actively participating in an online learning environment have online discussions and complete collaborative online assignments in which course material can be discussed. These are all examples of utilizing the constructivist approach to online instruction. Gulati (2008) stated that educators should be cautioned about the silent learner who refuses to participate in the discussions or feels disconnected and withdrawn from the dialogue. It is the responsibility of the teacher to facilitate the discussions to ensure that all have an opportunity to voice their thoughts and ideas (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009).

Constructivist theory relies heavily on communication and interaction through dialogue; however, being a competent and effective communicator can prove to be a complicated issue (Gulati, 2008). Factors such as trust, safety, choice, and control are key components for integrating the social constructivist theory to the online classroom. If not addressed properly, they could present the online student with obstacles that could threaten the success on an online course. Students may have dissimilar backgrounds or various levels of self-disclosure that will affect how open, safe, and trustworthy a student feels which can affect the type of communication that takes place (Gulati, 2008). Again, the teacher as facilitator must assume the responsibility to encourage dialogue and assure the participants of a safe environment.

A thoughtful and careful consideration of material, in which students have the opportunity to answer posted questions and then respond to others, allows the students to assimilate the information of others with their own (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Furthermore, the constructivist theory asserts that collaborative learning assignments, structured online discussion, and interactive course material are all strategies that promote a social constructivist position and are all integral to a successful online course (Gulati, 2008).
Many online students cited the amount of social interaction and academic integration (teacher feedback, follow-up, and content interest) as being the most important factors to completing an online course (Schell & Janicki, 2013). Next, community learning through social presence will be analyzed as a means to heighten the satisfaction levels for the online student (Tsai, 2012).

**Social Presence**

Social presence was defined as “the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships” (Garrison, 2007, p. 161). There are three primary components when establishing social presence, group connectedness, effective communication, and open communication (Garrison, 2007). Social presence can be compromised if the activities or assignments in a course become less collaborative and more information giving (Swan et al., 2009). Swan (2002) found that social presence is important to the success of an online class and required an effective and open communication among the group to promote cohesion. By establishing social presence, not only was rapport among the group members established but a higher level of learning and satisfaction occurred for both the teacher and student. As online teachers consider critical components when designing an online course, the concept of social presence should be integrated into the course by way of promoting group activities and collaboration.

As group cohesion is attempted, group roles should be analyzed and defined into specific categories. These categories include (a) group task roles, which include an information seeker and an elaborator, (b) group building and maintenance roles, which can include roles such as encourager, compromiser and gate-keeper, and lastly, (c) individual roles which include
such roles as dominator and aggressor (Chen & Jang, 2010). Typically, group roles emerge as the group task develops; however, group cohesion is dependent upon a group leader to ensure successful completion of the group directive (Chen & Jang, 2010). Next, student-student interaction as it relates to social presence will be explained.

Boerema, Stanley, and Westhorp (2007) indicated that teachers should consider three items when implementing collaborative learning including (a) timely feedback to the student, including feedback, grades and email responses (b) posting assignments that promote discussion, and (c) providing support for the students with their learning in regards to how to use the online learning platform. These strategies eliminated the common drawback to collaborative learning, including lack of student participation (Schwartzman, 2006).

Online learning in higher education has demanded an increase in use of and knowledge of community learning. This process involved a “support of higher learning and student satisfaction” (Garrison, 2007, p. 161). Young and Norgard (2006) posited that if teachers carefully design a course to include interaction between teachers and students, the outcome will result in higher learning of material. Young and Norgard (2006) went on to say that “the asynchronous, learner-centered nature of the online classroom may enhance the collaboration and conversation between students, as opportunities become more equal and democratic” (p. 110). This can be accomplished through a concept called community, in which online learning is enhanced and strengthened through interacting with others (Ascough, 2007). The next section will examine the concept of collaborative learning in an online course.

Collaborative learning is virtually an aspect of every online course and is often promoted through threaded discussion boards (Schwartzman, 2006). Students and teachers both feel a sense of satisfaction when there is successful collaborative learning, which is
characterized by active sharing of quality ideas from the students as well as timely and thoughtful responses from their peers (Boerema et al., 2007). The advantage to collaborative learning is that it motivates students to learn and produce higher learning outcomes. This is achieved by allowing students to help one another, learn from one another, and complete educational tasks related to their area of interest (Garrison, 2007).

Teachers who have been diligent in the preparation of their online course and have attempted to establish a sense of community in the classroom have had a better chance of retaining the student (Ascough, 2007). Shrivastava (1999) stated that when a group of people are “engaged in collective inquiry and enhancing their personal knowledge” (p. 692) the outcome of the course is positive due to the establishment of mutual learning. With the absence of the physicality of others that is present in a face-to-face classroom, online courses demand that teachers design their course to make their students feel connected to the class, the teacher, and to other students (Baker, Wentz, & Woods, 2009).

Research has documented how learning communities offered the educator an opportunity to explore various philosophical and educational theories and, subsequently, choose the method that works best for them. Quite simply, traditional learning requires that the educator hold an amount of power over the student through assignment requirements and information exchange; whereas, learning communities allowed for a social experience in education (Moller et al., 2008). According to research, online learning forces the educator to design a course in which the student is a self-directed learner, which allows for a collaborative approach, rather than a power struggle (Hosie et al., 2005).

Future research into the concept of community in the online course is needed. This may include incorporating voice feedback for students that can be introduced in an asynchronous
setting and then expanded into a synchronous session (Garrison, 2007). Successful online learning is increasingly becoming dependent on the establishment of community executed in an effective style to ensure student satisfaction, student retention, and student completion of an online course. The implication of studying social presence as it relates to the design and implementation of a course is critical. Furthermore, the synchronization of cognitive presence, social presence, and teacher presence in online courses proves to be a worthy source of investigation, as a means to solidify the value of online learning as well as achieving student satisfaction in an online environment (Swan et al., 2009.) Next, community colleges will be examined including its history, its current status and the students who attend community colleges in Illinois.

Community Colleges

Community colleges were designed to accept any student wishing to further their education in any of the three previously mentioned areas of (a) community, (b) vocational, and (c) professional development (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009). This was a major shift in the traditional student attending college who was the son or daughter of the wealthy, educated citizens who were pursuing a degree, much like their father’s or mother’s degree (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

History of Community Colleges

Historically speaking, community colleges were designed to provide a community with a higher education institution specifically aimed at the residents of that community (Jackson et al., 2010). There have been five phases for the community college spanning over 100 years.
The first phase started around 1900 and was considered a continuation of the secondary school. The second phase started around 1930 when the term junior college was coined. Then, in 1950, the third phase began and the colleges were called community colleges and were aimed at preparing students for a 4-year university. The fourth phase continued the use of the term community colleges but aimed at expanding programs to include vocational areas of study. Finally, the fifth phase began in the middle of the eighties and retained the name community college. This phase included community classes and extension sites (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Cohen and Brawer (2008) asserted that in the early 1900s, high schools experienced an increase in graduation rates from 30% in the 1920s to over 75% by 1960. This, in turn, increased the need for more higher education institutions as the American culture quickly recognized the importance of higher education in advancing one’s career (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). The community college has served as a means for local business owners to find qualified help, particularly in the vocational division, and is still considered to meet the needs of local workforce job openings (Bahr, 2013; Cohen & Brawer, 2008). In fact, the three areas of course offerings that the community college was originally designed to provide education for the community are still in existence today and include (a) the community education courses, sometimes referred to as adult education, (b) the workforce or vocational education courses, and (c) the general education degree courses that are meant to be taken and used as transfer classes to a 4-year university (Bahr, 2013). The community college established itself as a prominent force in higher education and its mission became to promote and develop local, civic and professional leaders (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

The surge in enrollments was attributed to the change in student demographics, which included first-generation college attendees as well as older students and students of diverse
ethnic and racial backgrounds (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Liu et al., 2009). In today’s society, community colleges are again experiencing an increase in enrollment due to the fact that the economy is struggling and many people cannot afford 4-year universities and colleges (Bahr, 2013). Community colleges became a way for upward mobility and allow people from low-income families to move up in class (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Community colleges attracted a new type of student that was not typically attending the traditional 4-year university or college. This non-traditional student included those who could not afford tuition, those who did not have the time to attend college, those whose ethnic background did not represent the dominant ethnicity attending traditional institutions, those who were inadequately prepared for college as a result of poorly run high schools, those who had been let go from their jobs, those who were physically disabled, those who were older than the typical 18-year old and, finally, those who could not read or write at college level standards (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Cohen and Brawer (2008) asserted that diversity has been adequately represented in community colleges with an appropriate number of ethnic groups attending community colleges as compared to the state population number of that same ethnic group. One example would be the state of Illinois that, according to a 2005 survey, had a state population of African-Americans at 8.2% and the number of African-Americans attending Illinois community colleges at 10.3%. Furthermore, the Hispanic state population was 2.3% and the Illinois community college Hispanic population was the same at 2.3% (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Soon, part-time student attendance had become a normal and accepted category of college student and is now the case in most institutions of higher learning (Bahr, 2013). The
community college paved the way for higher education to take a non-traditional approach to learning by offering classes at a lower cost. This allowed students, who may not have pursued a collegiate education in the past, to pursue and complete degrees (Cohen & Brawer, 2008).

Current Overview of Community Colleges

Today, community colleges not only prepare the transfer student for the next phase in their academic career, but they also address the needs of the business community it serves with training and vocational classes (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Most community colleges still aspire to represent the face of the community in that it is “shaped by the needs and demands of its host community, resulting in a unique mix and expression of a multifaceted mission” (Bahr, 2013, p. 436). While the mission of a community college may have stayed constant, the measure of its success has transformed. Enrollment numbers were a safe and feasible measure of a community college’s success. Today, enrollment cannot be the sole measure of accomplishment (Bahr, 2013).

Factors such as retention rates, completion rates, performance accountability, and graduation rates are better measures of an institution’s achievement (Liu et al., 2009). There are factors that contribute to low retention and completion rates. The African-American male student population is not completing courses and failing to graduate as compared to their peers (Palmer & Wood, 2013). Data indicates that black males have the lowest persistence rates when compared to other ethnic resulting in only 42.2% of black males graduating within 3 years after starting a degree program compared to 53.2% of Hispanic males (Palmer & Wood, 2013). These statistics contribute to low completion rates and have little to do with online barriers that other students have encountered.
Online learning has become more prevalent in community colleges than 4-year universities primarily due to the fact that community colleges have been termed “the people’s college” and aim to serve as many students as possible (Jackson et al., 2010, p. 79). It is the 2-year community college that has made up the majority of online course offered nationally and community colleges. However, “studies dedicated specifically to student satisfaction in distance education programs at two-year colleges are virtually non-existent” (Jackson et al., 2010, p. 80).

Online learning has contributed to the evolving landscape of higher education (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). Unfortunately, in regards to online learning, many community college presidents “either do not know how to examine their own institutions critically, or they are disinclined to do so” (Cohen & Brawer, 2008, p. 445). Treat and Hagedorn (2013) asserted that the community colleges are “very different from what existed when they were established…and can no longer be insulated from global concerns” (p. 1).

Treat and Hagedorn (2013) stated that the community colleges can be represented in three acts: Act I is the Pre-9/11 world, Act II is the Post 9/11 or Flat World and Act III is the Post Flat World. In Act I, community colleges were able to meet the needs of the community and continue to prepare students for transfer to a 4-year university with little to no thinking about global implications. Act II is represented by a sudden interest in foreign affairs and cultural differences to better cope with the terror felt after 9/11. The economy began to suffer and entrepreneurial efforts were becoming a common occurrence, particularly from young individuals. Finally, Act III represents a world emphasizing a need for graduates to be technologically trained and communication became electronically based rather than face-to-face. This is the act that community colleges are now entering and the need for global
involvement and awareness is building (Treat & Hagedorn, 2013). The next section describes the Illinois community college students.

Profile of Illinois Online Community College Students

In order to get a better idea of who the participants are in this study, a profile of the Illinois online community college student was examined. The Illinois Community College Board (2013) profiled community college students in Illinois who are taking online courses and documented the following. First, there were 163,804 students in Illinois Community Colleges who enrolled in an online course in 2008, which is compared to over 1.9 million students enrolling nationwide at community colleges. The average age for the student was 28.3 with 12.5% of the students aged 40 or older. Two thirds or 62.6% of Illinois community college who took online classes were female and 78.9% were white. Only 2.8% of the total numbers of online students were students who were not in Illinois but rather taking the course from another state or country. In fact, 86.8% reside within the district of the community college enrolled primarily in transfer courses that would lead to a bachelor’s degree at a 4-year university or college. The disciplines with the highest number of students were Sociology, Psychology, and Economics.

Community Colleges and Online Learning

Most often, the student who has a strong academic background and is academically more prepared, is attracted to online courses. This is also the student who has outside commitments such as family and work who appreciates the flexibility of online classes (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Because a large number of students at community colleges are enrolled in
online courses, it is the 2-year community college that is feeling the most pressure to ensure online learning success (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Face-to-face education is the norm for most higher education students, both traditional and nontraditional. This makes the transition from a face-to-face class to online course delivery a challenging adaptation (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Jaggars (2011) stated that very few students take all online courses but rather have a mix of face-to-face and online classes. Xu and Jaggars (2011) found that those who take online courses earn about the same grade when compared to face-to-face students; however, online students have lower retention rates when compared to face-to-face students. Generally, this means that while the grade may be relatively the same, the chance that the course may not be completed, when it is an online class, is higher (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Some factors that contributed to the lower student completion numbers, as they related to the online course, included students who lack basic computer skills and students who have a tendency to learn more effectively through auditory lessons (Harrell & Bower, 2011).

Community colleges typically enroll students who reside in the community and have the unique opportunity to collaborate with neighboring high schools to prepare the prospective student for online courses (Lendy, 2009). Ideas such as presentations detailing the learning management system used at the community college, trial courses, and orientation programs were suggestions as bridges between high school and college (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). While there is a perception that community colleges are simply an extension of high school, the trial courses would serve two purposes (Lendy, 2009). First, they would validate the fact that the courses taken at the community college level are more robust than those at the high school level and second, the trial courses could introduce the high school student to the online course
process in order to prepare them for enrolling in credit courses once they are at the community college (Lendy, 2009).

Online learning in the community college is an integral component to academic plans at institutions of higher education. Analyzing student satisfaction in online learning has become an important strategy for the future of 2-year community college (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). Online courses offered at community colleges must commit to increased interaction between the student and (a) other students, (b) the teacher, and (c) the content, in order to increase the satisfaction of the student participating in online courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Simply put, “without an improvement in online course success, it will become increasingly difficult to improve students’ academic progression” (Xu & Jaggars, 2011, p. 364).

There exists a large number of studies about online learning and students’ perceptions of online learning; yet, the studies concerning community college students are scarce. Currently, the research on community college students and their perception of online learning is limited to a profile of who the community college student is and retention rates. The gap in research revolving around community college students exists and could be strengthened with both qualitative and quantitative studies to gauge student perception through narrated experiences and a quantification of factors that contribute to online satisfaction. Furthermore, qualitative research may provide the quantitative researcher with vital information as to areas to investigate further to quantify the reasons for satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2010).

Investigating the experiences of students and their perceptions of satisfaction with online learning can provide a valuable tool for course design recommendations. While research in the field of online learning is plentiful, qualitative research of studies examining the perception of an online learner and what satisfies that learner, is needed. Research supports the
notion that online learning is a critical component of today’s higher education landscape and data details the growth of online courses at the 2-year community college as well as the 4-year university level. Recommendations for further research into the online learner’s experiences are evident and are of particular interest among community college online students. If considered and understood correctly, these studies can be a critical tool for successfully advancing online education.

Summary

Chapter two reviewed and discussed research literature regarding online learning as well as literature regarding the constructivist theory. This chapter discussed online learning in terms of student satisfaction with the online course as it relates to the community of inquiry theory and the importance of interaction in a course. This chapter provided an overview of the community of inquiry theory as well as the terms related to this theory. The constructivist approach to designing a course for online learning was discussed. In the discussion of the constructivist approach to learning, the importance of collaboration and actively engaging the student in the course through dialogue and reflection was analyzed. Lastly, information about community colleges was detailed into four sections including the history of community colleges, the current overview of community colleges, and the profile of Illinois community college online students.
CHAPTER 3

METHODS

The purpose of the study was to investigate community college students’ perspectives on online courses through a qualitative examination of their experiences of online learning. The goal was to better understand online learning from a student’s viewpoint so as to inform the design of online courses related to student satisfaction. Kuo et al. (2013) stated that “higher education institutions consider student satisfaction as one of the major elements in determining the quality of online programs in today’s markets” (p. 18). Student satisfaction studies have mostly consisted of quantitative research with the goal of detailing the factors contributing to student satisfaction (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of the participants through interviews in order to gain a deeper understanding of online learning. The conceptual framework for the study was the community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) blended with the research conducted by Moore (1989) regarding interaction. The research questions guiding this study were developed with the primary research question of what were the participants’ experiences of online learning?

RQ1: How do community college students, who have participated in online courses, describe their online learning experience?
RQ2: What are the community college students’ perceptions of online learning when compared to face-to-face learning?

RQ3: How do community college students describe their personal satisfaction with an online course in terms of (a) interaction with the teacher, (b) interaction with other students in an online course, and (c) interaction with the content or subject of the course?

Chapter three will provide a brief background to the study of online learning. This will include the rationale behind using qualitative research, the design of the study, the setting, participant, data collection, data analysis, and finally, ethical considerations involving researcher bias.

Design of the Study

The method of investigation warranted for this type of research is qualitative, as it provided an opportunity to engage participants in interviews and focus groups to determine specific perspectives of online learning (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The importance of determining student satisfaction in online learning is paramount in this quickly evolving modality of instructional delivery. For this study, I interviewed 15 community college students to elicit their experiences of online learning. In addition to the interviews, I conducted one focus group, and collected artifacts from four participants.

Qualitative research is interested in discovering and understanding perspectives of people involved in the study (Merriam, 2002). I was interested in eliciting the voice of the community college student who has participated in online learning. The goal of the interview process was to gain insight and understanding from each participant’s perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative research is interpretive and relies heavily on the idea that individuals
must interact with the social world. Qualitative research utilizes the data to construct knowledge and meaning from these interactions (Merriam, 2002). The community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2010) and the interaction theory (Moore, 1989) served as the theoretical foundation for this study.

In my study, the intent was to interpret the experiences of the participants and focus on students’ views of interaction with (a) the teacher, (b) other students in the class and, (c) the content of the course. Qualitative research can be defined as “any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 17).

In an effort to elicit rich descriptions of online students’ experiences with online courses, qualitative research can effectively achieve this through individual interviews and focus groups. The goal of the interviews is to build upon each type of data collection for a deeper understanding of the material (Merriam, 2002). This in-depth, rich description of online student experiences attempts to add to the distance education and online learning research by investigating community college students’ perceptions. Appropriate steps were taken to protect the participants’ identity by assigning pseudonyms to each of the individuals who contributed to the individual interviews as well as the individuals who participated in the focus group. This was done to adhere to privacy guidelines. Next, the study setting will be described.

Study Setting

The research site was Rock Valley College, a community college that predominantly serves 6 Illinois counties including Winnebago, Boone, Ogle, Stephenson, McHenry and DeKalb. The mission of the college is stated as being an educational leader to prepare students
for transfer to a 4-year university and to foster collaborative relationships within the community. Rock Valley College strives to provide leadership in the importance and value of learning as well as promote respect for individuals and the responsible utilization of resources (Rock Valley College strategic plan, 2012-2015).

Rock Valley College is located on a 217-acre wooded campus and has many regional sites that offer classes and other opportunities for the community including the Main Campus located on North Mulford Road in Rockford, Illinois. The annual operating budget is $55.6 million with 40% of that coming from local taxes. Degrees offered are Associate of Arts, the Associate of Arts in teaching, Associate in Science, Associate in Engineering Science, Associate in Applied Science, and Associate in General Studies. There are over 60 course areas that directly contribute to a 4-year degree. Online courses have been offered since 2001; however, the HLC did not award accreditation until 2011 to offer a complete degree online. This was not due to problems or obstacles but rather due to the fact that RVC did not apply to the HLC until 2011 (Rock Valley College Office of Institutional Research, 2015).

Statistics regarding the student population and its demographics were found in the RVC Student Profile Report (2015) from the Office of Institutional Research and included the overall head count, average age, gender, minority enrollment, full/part-time enrollment, highest degree earned when they start RVC, and residency status. As of spring of 2012, Rock Valley College had an overall head count of 8,635 students of which the average age was 26.4. Of the 8,635 students, 41% of them were male and 59% were female. The student population consisted of 42% full-time students and 58% part-time students with 6,622 of those students having earned a high school diploma or GED as their highest degree. Students at Rock Valley College hold other degrees including business degrees and 171 hold bachelor’s degree.
Participants

Participants were solicited via college email and were presented with a formal request letter from a sample of students currently attending Rock Valley College. Of the 800 students who are currently enrolled in an online course, I solicited students by sending emails directly to those students who have already enrolled and completed an online course. The Institutional Research Department had those students in a database that I could easily access. Once I received responses to the emails, I selected a cross section of the student body using demographic information including gender. I did not select any students who were currently enrolled in one of my online courses or who planned on taking any of my online courses in the future. I did not exclude any students who had already completed an online course with me as the teacher.

The individual interviewees had taken a range of face-to-face classes with zero being the lowest total number of classes and twenty being the highest. The focus group participants had taken a range of face-to-face classes with nine being the lowest total number of face-to-face classes and twenty being the highest total number of face-to-face classes taken. Consent forms were given to the participants and collected before the interviews and focus group began (see Appendices B and D).

The study was limited to participants who were students who had completed at least one online class, so that the study could identify common experiences and patterns. Participants were purposefully selected as being identified as students who have taken an online course at Rock Valley College. The sample was drawn from community college students at Rock Valley College who had completed at least one online credit course and earned at least a C or better.
and was completed in the last four years. Completion of a course is important so as to gauge the online experience in its entirety, from start of the course to its end.

The pool of individual interview participants consisted of nine females and six males while the focus group consisted of three females and one male. Of the 15 interviewees, three had taken online courses other than at Rock Valley College and twelve had only taken online courses at Rock Valley College. The focus group did not have any participants who had taken classes outside of Rock Valley College. The individual interviewees had a range of two classes up to twelve total online classes taken at Rock Valley College. The focus group participants ranged from those who had taken two online classes taken at Rock Valley College up to those who had taken four online classes at RVC.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) outline several reasons why interviewing is effective in qualitative research. They include such factors as the fact that interviews can promote interaction with the participant, interview questions as well as follow-up questions can provide rich, deep context-rich answers including their own personal accounts and perceptions, data is typically collected in a natural environment, interviews may be structured which can provide descriptive accounts of interactions and processes, and finally, they can “facilitate discovery of nuances in culture” (p. 252). The below table depicts the demographic analysis of the participants in the individual interviews and the focus group (see Table 1).

Data Collection

Before data collection and the interviews began, a process involving the Institutional Research Board, at both Northern Illinois University and Rock Valley College, took place. This study was exempt from full board review and lasted approximately one week for Northern
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual interviews</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number of online courses taken at Rock Valley College</th>
<th>Online courses outside of Rock Valley College?</th>
<th>Number of face-to-face course taken at Rock Valley College</th>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>9</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>Jose</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>George</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Allyssa</td>
<td>F</td>
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<td>Focus Group</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>Connor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
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Illinois University and five months for Rock Valley College before approval from both institutions was awarded. This study utilized semi-structured interviews lasting 75-101 minutes with guiding, open-ended questions that encouraged in-depth sharing of online learning experiences. Follow-up questions or probes were included when more information was needed from the participant. Seidman (2006) uncovered data through an “in-depth, phenomenological based interviewing” (p. 15). This approach was used to uncover shared experiences and assumptions from open-ended questions and prompts. Seidman (2006) outlined the importance and definition of these interviews as a way to “build upon and explore…participant’s responses…to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic under study” (p. 15).

Merriam (2002) stated that the semi-structured interview is one in which there are pre-determined questions as well as follow-up questions, or probes, and questions that may not appear on the interview question list. After conducting the first two interviews, there appeared a need to reorganize the existing questions to aid the interviewee in making sense of the probes. Simply, the order of questions confused the participants and deemed necessary reorganization of the questions so that the questions fell into a certain sequential order to reduce confusion.

A total of 15 individual interviews were conducted from August 2014 through December of 2014. Each interview lasted between 75 and 101 minutes. One interview required email follow-up as the participant felt that he did not fully include everything he wanted to say during the recorded interview. These interviews were audiotaped, semi-structured interviews with pre-determined questions that were asked with follow-up or probes, as a result of a comment or idea the participant has offered that needed further information. (Interview questions are listed under Appendix A).
The questions had a broad scope so as to allow for elaboration from the participant. These notes have been documented as such. Copious note-taking took place throughout each interview which was audio taped and then transcribed from the audio tapes. These transcriptions were typed and used as data to analyze the individual interviews. At the completion of each interview, the researcher requested participation in a focus group. While none of the individual interviewees agreed to be further analyzed, four individuals, who did not participate in individual interviews, agreed to participate in a separate focus group.

Focus groups are beneficial in that they can clarify the perceptions of individuals involved in the research and expand on collected data from individuals (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) and “foster talk among the participants about particular issues” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 109). These transcriptions were typed and used as data to analyze the focus group. (Questions for the focus group are listed under Appendix C).

The focus group was conducted in December of 2014 lasting 124:15 minutes. In general terms, focus groups are “collective conversations, which can be small or large” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 3). For the purpose of this study, the focus group served as a means to collect important information in a group setting so as to encourage critical thinking and perhaps, develop insight that could not be obtained via individual interviews. This type of discussion is meant to be a “negotiation of meanings through intra-personal and inter-personal debates” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 4). The setting for the focus group was a public library in Roscoe Illinois in a conference room where privacy was given to the participants. The focus group was video and audio taped and was conducted with semi-structured interview questions, similar to those asked during the individual interviews. A table was used that could seat all focus group
participants and was used to hold the recorder for back-up audio if the videotaped portion was inaudible. Both video and audio were used in data analysis.

Finally, artifacts were collected at both the individual interviews and the focus group session. Han and Johnson (2012) stated that there are several advantages to collecting artifacts in educational research. Three reasons to collect artifacts include (a) the advantage that this method has an unobtrusive nature to the collection of data, (b) how the past can be accurately represented through completed assignments and documents and, (c) how artifacts are useful in corroborating interviews and focus groups (Han & Johnson, 2012).

Furthermore, artifacts can reduce reactive comments and discussion both on the interviewee and the researcher’s part which can be useful for further exploration (Han & Johnson, 2012). Artifacts were requested from all participants. Most participants stated that they did not have anything from previous online classes or did not feel comfortable providing examples of coursework from other classes for this research study. Four participants provided artifacts to be analyzed including a syllabus, an English sentence structure revision assignment, a chapter summary assignment, a research paper and a discussion board. Additionally, the artifacts collected have been altered to block out specific course titles, teacher names, and sections.

**Data Analysis**

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) wrote that data analysis is a “process of systematically searching and arranging the interview transcripts, field notes, and other materials that you accumulate to enable you to come up with findings” (p. 159). By working with the data, one can undertake general analysis in an attempt to relate those findings to other published research
Reducing the information to manageable concepts through first and second level coding, the research can take shape into noticeable patterns. This can produce conclusions based on the interviews, focus group, and artifacts collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

This study used multiple sources as data and required a detailed analysis of each data source. From the transcribed interviews and focus group, there was a three-step process including first level coding, second level coding, and analytic memos that were used in the process of analysis (Saldaña, 2012). Before any coding took place, each interviewee received their own folder with their name and their pseudonym recorded on the front of the folder. Each folder contained interview notes with preliminary coding and/or general patterns observed during the interview. The consent forms and the interview script with documented interview notes transcribed on each script were also in each folder. I bracketed my own assumptions and thoughts so that the additional thoughts were noted as mine and not the interviewee. The following paragraphs will explain each level of coding as well as a detailed analysis of how this examination was used in reference to the interviews, focus group, and artifacts that served as the process of data analysis.

Initial coding is a system of analyzing the data and marking themes in order to establish connections between patterns and concepts within the participants’ answers (Saldaña, 2012). Initial coding is typically used for interviews to begin the process of emerging patterns within the context of the participants’ comments as a “method of attuning yourself to participant language, perspectives and worldviews” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 64). During the initial coding, several themes emerged in my study. One example of an overarching theme would be teacher role and interaction which had many sub-category codes including teacher is valuable, teacher is a means to an end, teacher provides the learning goals, teacher serves as a guide/coach,
teacher can provide answers to questions, teacher can establish connectedness to the material, teacher can design and explain rubrics, teacher can give valuable feedback, teacher can respond to work and grade, teacher can establish a rapport by posting personal thoughts, and finally, teacher can act as a gatekeeper to problems and discussions.

In this initial phase, I began by writing every category mentioned in papers bound in each of the participants’ folders. Many categories began to emerge and this list was used as an overarching list from which the smaller list of repeated words and phrases was formed. The frequency of words and phrases represented what would materialize as dominant findings in my research. Saldaña (2012) stated that this “process consists of moving from the reading and memoing loop into the spiral to the describing, classifying and interpreting loop” (p. 151).

During the initial coding or first level coding, the data is grouped according to similarity as well as the differences that may emerge as well as the relationships between data that exist between comments (Saldaña, 2012). For the artifacts collected in this study, descriptive coding was applied to detail the inventory (Saldaña, 2012). Research shows that “definition of situation codes, subjects’ way of thinking about people and objects, perspectives held by subjects, process and event codes as well as narrative codes” are all procedures that can support the process of data analysis to form connections and theoretical implications (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, pp. 177-178).

Once the transcribed interviews underwent first level coding, second level coding occurred. This level of coding had the data undergo a grouping process in which themes and patterns are grouped together. These pattern codes or meta-codes can take several categories and further break down the data and show “major themes and begin to form theoretical constructs” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 210). Saldaña (2012) noted that this bracketing of information
will search for “rules, causes and explanations in the data” (p. 220). Bracketing is a process that phenomenological research employs in an attempt to find the common themes and patterns from a group of people who are engaged in a similar situation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

Saldaña (2012) posited that as you move through the coding procedures, first level coding becomes second level coding where “classifying pertains to taking the text or qualitative information apart, and looking for categories, themes or dimensions of information (p. 153). Furthermore, patterns emerged in this study and were identified in terms of significance to the overarching concepts researched (LeCompte, 2000). Then, there was a reorganization of material that placed similar ideas together to identify codes as well as frequency of repetition of words (LeCompte, 2000).

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) asserted that data analysis using qualitative research involves an ongoing and thorough review of the interviews, transcripts, documents, and other pieces of data collected during the data collection phase. One example would be the initial concept of flexibility that emerged from first level coding which then expanded to themes under second level coding, and included flexibility with schedules, flexibility with family life, and flexibility with work life. Data was re-analyzed to determine how the findings related to the research questions of narrated experiences, online learning as compared to face-to-face learning, and finally, interaction in the online classroom. New categories emerged as focused units of information that could be used to answer the research questions posed in the study. Themes were developed from these units of data analysis as a means to, eventually, advance general conclusions found in the research.

Lastly, analytical memos were used to reflect on the data collected by analyzing three factors which are (a) to review “the coding processes and codes chosen” (b) “how the process
of inquiry is taking shape,” and (c) reflect on the “emergent patterns, categories and sub-categories, themes and concepts in the data” with the possibility of leading toward an appropriate theory (Saldaña, 2012, p. 41).

For this study, analytical memos served as a way to further develop the content of the data collected by pulling out information to further clarify, or otherwise, develop further than simply coding (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2007). Analytical memos are not field-notes but rather they “serve as an additional category-generating method” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 51). Moving from data collection to analysis to writing the formal paper is a process that involves transitioning from one level of understanding to the next (Saldaña, 2012). The function of the analytical memo was to record personal reflections about certain pieces of data gathered and reflects on the connectedness to other pieces of your research.

Furthermore, Saldaña (2012) asserted that coding and analytical memos have a reciprocal relationship which lends itself to the evolution of understanding the phenomenon. The analytical memos served an important purpose in that they allowed reflection to occur at later dates after the interview was complete. Reflection included the decision to revise interview questions, add prompts or orienting statements to questions, as well as eliminating confusing questions. By reviewing the analytical memos for notes and comments, I was able to increase the richness and accuracy of the information offered by the participants. One example of a change that occurred due to the analytical memo was with a question that was stated as “Have you attended any other college?” and was changed to “Have you taken online courses at other colleges. If so, can you describe the difference between online classes at Rock Valley College and online classes at that college?” This change allowed for a more in-depth uncovering of information from the participants. The next section breaks down each type of
data collected and the process through which data analysis occurred in each area, specifically, the individual interviews, the focus group and the artifacts.

Data analysis of the individual interviews consisted of identifying and examining codes as they might relate to broader themes. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) posited that “certain words, phrases, patterns of behavior, subjects’ way of thinking, and events repeat and stand out” (p. 173). Therefore, codes and coding categories were developed from the data to identify these similarities and differences in the research. After coding the narrative descriptions of the participant’s experiences, the data was then condensed down to dominant concepts. This study utilized Saldaña’s (2012) descriptive coding is commonly used in qualitative studies and answers the following questions, “What is going on here?” and “What is this study about?” (p. 88) to guide and describe the basic topics found in the data.

As stated earlier, Liamputtong (2011) has outlined a process through which focus groups can be analyzed called symbolic interactionism. First, the premise of behaving towards things based on one’s predetermined meaning was achieved by establishing the commonality of everyone had previously taken an online course. Finally, symbolic interactionism theory, as it relates to focus group methodology, is that “meanings are managed and changed though an interpretive process that individuals employ in dealing with the things they experience” (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 17). Focus group analysis follows a similar premise of thematic analysis while adding an “examination of social integration factors such as how participants came up with a shared reality” which adds a layer of negotiated meaning (Liamputtong, 2011, p. 173).

Garrison et al. (2000) outlined a specific set of criteria to be used as content analysis of the artifacts provided. This criterion includes detailing and breaking down the following into
(a) triggering event, (b) exploration and, (c) integration. To be more specific, when considering the content of the course, in this case, when analyzing the artifacts provided from online courses, the three areas of content analysis can be applied to more accurately determine the effectiveness of course design and content interaction by the student.

In the case of the triggering event, the student would interact with the content of the course such as syllabus, assignments and chapter content. This would cause the student to recognize the problem; thereby, causing a sense of puzzlement or desire to find an answer. Next, the exploration phase would entail analyzing the artifact representing the course content to determine if there was information exchange between the teacher and the student to limit the amount of ambiguity. Finally, the last phase of content analysis applied to the artifacts in this study was the integration of information to conclude if ideas were connected and solutions were created.

The artifacts provided to this study included one syllabus, one English sentence structure assignment, chapter summaries, a formal English paper, and discussion boards. Each was analyzed first using the content analysis outlined by Garrison et al. (2000) community of inquiry theory of triggering event, exploration, and integration.

Researcher Role and Bias

As a graduate of Rock Valley College and a current student at Northern Illinois University, I felt that I have the empathy to understand some common characteristics between me and the participants, such as the fact that I was a single mother when I attended Rock Valley College and that I have taken online classes both as a requirement before I taught and through Northern Illinois University. As a single mom, I could understand the struggles of
finding time to complete a degree and the flexibility of time when one can take an online class. Prior to attending Rock Valley College in 1991, I worked full-time to support my daughter and know that the cost of tuition and books can be overwhelming and sometime disrupt academic studies and assignments. It was my intention to convey some of these commonalities to my participants so that they felt more comfortable relating their outside lives to their answers, if applicable.

I have been teaching at Rock Valley College since 1996, after I finished my Master’s degree in communication at Eastern Illinois University where I also was a teaching assistant. I have been teaching online since 2001 and have served on distance learning committees as well as online learning evaluation groups. I was heavily involved with the accreditation process through the Higher Learning Commission to validate the online degree at Rock Valley College. Various committees and positions I have held at Rock Valley College include chair of the Communication Department, Adjunct Faculty evaluation committee, Arts Instructional Building task force and consultant, Daycare committee, and ICCB research coordinator for the Communication Department. Since I conducted the interviews at my place of employment, careful steps were noted during the selection process so as not to choose prior students who would not feel comfortable commenting on my personal course. If a prior relationship existed with the interviewee, I noted it in the research notes.

Since I have taught online and have my own assumptions regarding online teaching, I was careful not to ask leading questions to validate my own viewpoints. Additionally, consideration was given to interviewees to listen and not interject my own experiences and perception as that may have altered the interviewee’s answers. I may, as researcher, have had preconceived notions and biases; however, it was critical that, in an attempt to remain
objective, I embraced the subjectivity of the study and try to make sense of the material (Merriam, 2002). Furthermore, Merriam (2002) found that the biases and subjectivity “can be seen as virtuous...from the unique configuration of their personal qualities joined to the data they have collected” (p. 5).

I believe the biggest challenge I faced was remaining unbiased toward the material as well as towards the interviewees’ responses. Furthermore, the responsibility of conveying information to the participants regarding the data gathered from the interviews and focus group was confidential and would not result in any institutional biases from Rock Valley College. I had my own experiences in this area which make it difficult, at times, to not have preconceived notions about what I think they would say or what the research asserts.

Summary

Chapter three described the methods used in this study including a detailed rationale as to why qualitative research was used. This chapter described (a) the design of the study, (b) the study setting, (c) the participants of the study, (d) data collection, (e) data analysis and, (f) researcher role. Chapter four will explain the findings from the interviews, focus group, and artifact collection.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Chapter four will present the findings through discussion of the interviews, focus group, and artifacts collected using the three research questions as a means to reveal community college students’ perspectives toward online learning. Particular attention was given to student interaction with the teacher, student interaction with other students, and student interaction with the course subject matter. This approach was based upon the community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) which was used as a lens through which to view the material from a theoretical viewpoint. In this chapter, three concepts that follow the research questions will be discussed as well as corresponding categories and themes.

In the community of inquiry theory, social presence of student-student interaction serves as means to replicate the social interaction that takes place in a face-to-face class with discussion boards and group projects (Amelink & Hall, 2012). Second, teaching presence or student-teacher interaction includes the climate the teacher establishes as well as the content selected for the course. Lastly, the cognitive presence or student-to-content interaction is an overlap of interacting with the subject matter and the content that the teacher has selected. The findings in this study have suggested that these factors are of great importance to the online student and their perspective of satisfaction. This research study offers an analysis of
community college students’ perception of online learning and how that relates to their overall satisfaction with online learning.

The community of inquiry theory includes the components of student-student interaction or social presence, student-content interaction or cognitive presence, and student-teacher interaction or teacher presence. Regarding the component of student-student interaction, there will be discussion regarding having too much interaction with other students in an online class that is not needed, or a waste of time as well as how student-student interaction does not contribute to a student’s overall learning. The finding that student-content interaction is important to the relatability to a subject or content of the class is discussed, as well as how there are certain subjects that should not be taught online.

The first major finding that emerged from the research was the notion that students had both positive and negative experiences in online classes. The positive experiences included flexibility in scheduling, the freedom to work on other classes, work ahead in the online class and being able to do homework anytime all contributed to the overall satisfaction of the participants’ experience with online courses. The three reasons for negative experiences that emerged from the research were (a) too much student-student interaction, (b) learner isolation, and (c) struggles with technology (see Table 2).

The first concept researched was the students’ perception of online learning. The above table illustrates the various reasons for both positive and negative online experiences. This resulted in two overarching categories of positive experiences and negative experiences with online learning. In either case, positive or negative, the student felt that learning did take place and the satisfaction of the course, whether positive or negative, did not affect the attainment of the expected academic knowledge they wished to achieve. Dziuban (2015) stated that online
Table 2
Positive and negative experiences with online classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for a positive online experience</th>
<th>Reasons for a negative online experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility accommodates busy schedule</td>
<td>Required to interact with other students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility allows for work schedules</td>
<td>Group projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility allows more free time to work on other classes</td>
<td>Learner autonomy/wish to be alone in learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility of schedule results in less time in class/on campus</td>
<td>Struggles with technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling flexibility allows for care of family needs</td>
<td>Subject matter too hard to learn online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Learner satisfaction can be elusive due to the fact that satisfaction may depend on “context dependent factors such as college, discipline, course level, institution, and instructor” (p. 3).

Positive and Negative Experience with Online Learning

In this study, the satisfaction levels of the participants were higher, due to the fact that online classes provide convenience. Flexibility issues that were documented in relation to online learning and satisfaction included attaining more free time for other classes, family, work, moving, sickness and personal life. Other factors influenced by flexibility included working at their own pace, saving money on gas as well as driving time and the option to do homework at any time.

Positive Experiences with Online Learning

The positive experiences the participants described included flexibility a primary factor in the satisfaction levels of online students. This is because flexibility provides students the
ability to fit work and college into their schedule. Flexibility has increased interest in higher education due to the fact that students, who could not commit to face-to-face classes, now enroll in online courses (Dziuban et al., 2013). The participants stated which class they took online, which is noted after their name. Appendix E goes into detail about each of the online classes taken by the participants. Julie, who took English 101 online, felt that her experience with online learning was a positive one due to the scheduling flexibility that resulted in freedom and independence from having to go to class. It provided her extra time for her personal life and she stated that she felt that more courses should be offered in this delivery format. She explained,

I have had nothing but positive experiences with online learning at Rock Valley College and I wish more courses were offered this way. Online courses have become my preferred format. Online learning has exceeded my expectations. I like the way the modules are set up and I can access additional information any time I want to. I was hesitant to take an online class due to the fact that you don’t see the professor but I actually feel I got to know the professor and interacted just as much.

As Julie described, she was a bit nervous to take an online class even though it provided the flexibility she needed in her busy schedule. Julie seemed to be the type of student who could work ahead or at her own pace and enjoyed that the online class was set up this way. Face-to-face classes are typically not flexible enough to allow a student to move at their own pace and this emerged to Julie, as an attractive bonus to taking an online class. Irvine, Code, and Richards (2013) stated that the issue of flexibility still is a reason in the decision making process of a student who is considering taking an online class. They even go so far as to say that the online modality of learning has become known as the anytime or anywhere opportunity for the online student to learn the material (Irvine et al., 2013).
The phrase anytime or anywhere is used in online learning research, as it conveys the attitude of the participants in that they felt the convenience of being able to study whenever and wherever they desire. The notion of flexibility emerged as a factor relating to higher levels of satisfaction. The participants had similar positive experiences with online learning that incorporated flexibility as a factor. George, who enrolled in Sociology 190 online, felt that he had a positive experience with online classes due to the anytime/anywhere approach as well as being able to meet his work schedule. George stated,

I have really enjoyed online learning in that everything that is due is clearly defined and stated online where it is listed with due dates. I also really liked that my busy schedule could be accommodated and I could complete the course at my own pace. When I have free time, I log in and complete what I can and then log in again when it is convenient for me, not the pre-set scheduled time of a face-to-face course. I really enjoyed that it was all about when I had time to do everything, 2AM or whatever, as long as everything was completed by the due date.

Matt, Elizabeth, and Allison had similar experiences in regards to the satisfaction of the online course being directly related to flexibility and the fact that they could tend to family schedules and obligations. In each instance, the participant made statements such as Matt’s comment, when he stated, “I live far away and it is 25 miles to get here. The time commitment and the driving, with my family, make it very important to me to eliminate as much campus time as possible. Online classes meet my needs and I am generally always satisfied.”

Elizabeth echoed Matt’s perspective when she stated, “I chose to take an online class because I work full-time and have a family that I provide for. I thought that it would be easier to maintain home life and be able to fulfill my responsibilities as a mom and I was pleasantly surprised that everything worked.” Finally, Allison stated, “The online courses are better than I expected particularly because I work full-time and am a full-time parent so my schedule is not
very open. I want to take as many classes as possible to graduate quickly so I can move on and I appreciate that online courses help me do this”. Other reasons students cited flexibility as a factor in satisfaction levels of online students emerged when life events, such as moving, demand flexibility in a student’s academic pursuits. Kassie, who enrolled in English 103 online, noted that,

I wanted to take online courses because I prefer online learning over face-to-face classes but I was unsure exactly what my work schedule would look like this year. In addition, I was planning on moving sometime and I did not know when that would be or if I would have missed too much of a traditional class.

Sampson, Leonard, Ballenger, and Coleman (2010) explored factors contributing to the satisfaction of online student’ experience and found that flexibility continued to emerge as a significant reason leading to satisfaction, particularly, because of the anytime/ anywhere notion. Several participants noted the flexibility in not having to commit to driving to campus and being able to finish work at home as reasons for satisfaction with online learning. Jose, Catherine, and Jennifer gave examples of these reasons for their positive experience with online learning and how it eased their schedules. Jose, who enrolled in Psychology 170 online, stated,

I chose to take online classes because of schedule conflicts but mainly to save on driving miles and gas money. Plus, the outcome of this class was much better than I expected. Because of the pressure-free environment from not having to sit in class for an hour and fifteen minutes or turn in homework every day makes for a positive learning experience. It also taught me to pace myself, teach myself and feel an overall sense of independence and accomplishment.

Catherine added, “Not having to drive to campus was a huge bonus. My course load was so heavy this semester with face-to-face classes that it was nice not to have to be tied to another one and get some free time and a break from driving to campus.” Jennifer stated that, “I
decided to take an online class for the convenience of only having to drive to class for my face-to-face classes and not the online one. This freed up time to work on all of my classes and fit my work schedule better as well. I wanted to limit driving time and costs and figured this would help.”

Aslanian and Clinefelter (2014) listed flexibility and convenience as the two most common reasons students take online classes. The focus group participants added to this assertion when Jessica, Connor, and Rachel discussed their experiences with online learning and flexibility. The concept of flexibility was explored in greater detail and agreed upon as a distinguishing factor leading to satisfaction of online classes in the focus group. First, Jessica, who enrolled in SPH 131 online, stated,

I feel like the teacher does the same type of teaching as they do in the class but you can do it on your own time and you don’t have to sit though the lectures. It’s important to me to have that flexibility in your schedule as you don’t have to be in class or on campus at a set time. You can just do your assignments whenever you want and you don’t have to sit in class, let’s say, every Tuesday night at 6:00.

Adding to Jessica’s experiences, Connor agreed with Jessica in that he not only had the flexibility to study at his own convenience but that, in agreement with Jessica, Connor felt that online learning matched his learning style of self-directed learning in which students are in control of their learning (Lim, Morris, & Kupritz, 2007). Furthermore, Lim et al. (2007) coined the term “academic self-concept” (p. 43) to encapsulate the notion that there is a correlation between higher academic self-concept and higher levels of academic success. Connor, who enrolled in Psychology 276 or Life Span Developmental Psychology online, demonstrated this concept when he contributed,

I think the flexibility of online classes allowed for my success. I didn’t mind
having to read a huge book because it was broken up into weeks and days to do the chapters, but I didn’t have to adhere to that schedule as long as I had half completed by midterm and the other half of the book at the end of the semester. I could do two chapters a day and then take a break, which was very helpful.

The flexibility that online classes provided for the participants’ schedules was noted by several participants as a reason for taking an online class; however, flexibility can be defined in relation to financial reasons which convinced a student to take an online class. Rachel stated that “it would cost her $100 in gas just to come to class two times a week so it is critical for me to have the flexibility that an online class gives to me and my schedule.” Another flexibility issue that was not discussed often but that was raised by Karen was the weather. Bad weather became an issue for Karen, who enrolled in English 101, as she discussed her flexibility issues as contributing to her satisfaction levels with online learning. She stated,

The most appealing thing about online learning is the flexibility. You don’t have to waste time traveling to campus which is very unpleasant on winter evenings. You can go at your own pace, and complete more classes per semester than if you have to go to campus and sit through the classes face-to-face. By freeing up critical time, I can schedule additional classes and work on them throughout the weekend or off time.

Similarly, Cameron reflected on the fact that he had a family to care for and this was his reason to take an online class. His online learning experience was satisfactory because his needs to take care of his family as well as his need to work full-time were met by taking online classes. Flexibility in freeing his time in the day from sitting in class was helpful in meeting his family’s needs and his work needs. Cameron, enrolled in Sociology 190, also commented in the anytime/anywhere approach to online learning when he explained,

The satisfaction I get from online learning is knowing that I can still be going to college without having to actually be at campus. I have kids to care for and a full-time job, so it is nice to be able to work on assignments
at my leisure. I like the way classes are set up make it easily accessible for the student. Having a good teacher also makes the process of online classes much easier.

While flexibility may seem like a simple concept leading to satisfaction with online learning, the participants in this study felt this was an important element to identify as a component leading to increased satisfaction in online learning as well as understanding how flexibility with online classes can be attractive for community college students. Finally, Dee, Mitchell, David, and Allyssa supplemented this assertion with their thoughts on flexibility and online learning. First, Dee, who enrolled in Mass Communication 130, stated,

I am currently working full-time and do a lot of community service functions. Online classes deemed the best fit for my busy lifestyle. The only issue was finding the core courses I needed to take, as time went by, online classes that were needed and available to take became obsolete. More classes need to be offered online, both sections and classes.

Dee was not an unusual candidate for taking an online class for flexibility of scheduling purposes as she was heavily involved in community service and participated in several events. By taking an online class, Dee felt that she could have taken more classes online had they been offered. The opportunity to take additional classes as well as the flexibility of having more time was the reasoning behind Mitchell’s level of higher satisfaction with online classes. Simply stated, students who balanced the amount of online classes with the amount of face-to-face classes allowed themselves extra time outside of class to complete homework assignments and papers. Mitchell also pointed out the subject matter may have a direct impact on whether he enrolls in a class that is offered online. Mitchell, who enrolled in Speech 201 or Interpersonal Communication, described his online experience as a positive one when he explained,

My main decision to take an online course was the flexibility and not
being required to go to a class once or twice a week. This allowed me
to take more classes that are on campus and allowed me to still be able to
work full-time. I avoid taking a course online if I know that have to come to
campus at all or if I feel I might need assistance which would result in
coming to campus for help. One example might be statistics or a math class.

David, who enrolled in Economics 110, appreciated the flexibility online classes offered
because he works second shift and was trying to go to college. He did not feel the need to
physically sit in a classroom to learn the material. Setting his own pace and completing the
homework and online assignments when he was off work was an important factor contributing
to his positive online learning experience. He noted,

Online classes have always been a positive experience because of the flexibility.
I got to set my own pace and that was the best part about it because I could
sit down and get the work done when I had the time available versus when
you have to go into class, like, every Tuesday and Thursday and just
sit there in a classroom. I work second shift so I get off at 4:00 in the morning,
work a bit on homework and then when I wake up before work,
finish it up. You can’t do that in a scheduled class that is on campus.

The reality that David faced is not unlike other community college students who try
to work and go to school. In fact, many community college students also work full-time
(Lim, 2001) and find themselves scrambling to fit an academic schedule into their busy lives.
In David’s case, he works second shift leaving little time to sleep and then go to school during
the traditional hours of 7:30 a.m.-9:00 p.m. Dziuban et al. (2013) found that when a student has
a sense of agency, which is defined as the students’ “ability to initiate and control their own
actions in the learning environment,” (p. 8) that the student will generally be more satisfied
with the online learning experience. Allyssa, who enrolled in English 101, discussed this
concept when she noted that the flexibility of the online classes helped her with time
management as well as her overall learning. She explained,
Online courses work better with my schedule and it makes me feel better knowing that I can get my work done on my own time. The ability to take care of my assignments at home and not have to make arrangements to get to class and then do homework in addition to going to class, has freed up my schedule. I am able to sit down, figure out what needs to be done, manage my time and complete all of my readings and assignments on my terms.

Allyssa noted that she can manage her time better when she is taking an online class as compared to a face-to-face class. She manages her time to effectively and efficiently do the mandated readings, and still finish her homework in the time it would normally take to attend class and then go home to complete the homework assignments. While the number of positive experiences outweighed the number of negative experiences, some still emerged. The three reasons for negative experiences that emerged from the research were (a) too much student-student interaction, (b) learner isolation, and (c) struggles with technology. Research has shown that there are other factors that can lead to negative online learning experience including the subject matter was too hard or the course was not designed very well (Baharin, Lateh, Nawawi, & Nathan, 2015; Battalio, 2009).

Moore, Dickson-Deane, and Galyen (2011) suggested that online learning flexibility has led to an understanding of a freer schedule, but also that the learner will define the learning experience to their own expectations. This may lead to a negative experience if those expectations are different or not met by the online class. As stated earlier, this study found that factors contributing to a negative experience included the requirement to interact with other students, struggles with technology, and difficulty with the subject matter.
Negative Experiences with Online Learning

The second major finding that emerged from the research was the fact that the modality of face-to-face instruction was the preferred delivery mode of online learning for reasons that included having other students around being helpful, the need for the teacher to be physically present in the classroom, and finally, the enjoyment of interacting with other students. Participants in this study cited the convenience of taking an online class but, if a choice was given to them, the preference would be to take a face-to-face class.

Enightoola, Fraser, and Brunton (2014) found in their research that “negative experiences can exist in online learning and are typically related to a bad experience or just an overall feeling of online classes being inefficient and needing to place more emphasis on learning and less on interaction with students” (p. 93). This study had several themes emerge in the area of negative experiences and how they related to online learning including a negative reaction to required student interaction, learner autonomy, struggles with technology, and finally, conflict with the subject or content of the course.

Muse (2003) researched community college students and their perception of online learning. Research identified many barriers which diminished students’ success and satisfaction levels with online learning. The list of barriers includes technology, lack of face-to-face contact, isolation, overuse of interaction between students, and computer literacy. Allyssa could relate to the idea that negative experiences could be a result of too much required interaction with other students when she told her story of her bad experience in one of her classes. She explained,

A bad experience I had was when I took an online course, a composition class, and I never even met the professor and he had us interacting online
all the time. There was plenty of teacher-student and student-student interaction but one of the assignments he had us complete was to write a rough draft and then post it and get your critiques from others in the class, other students I mean. You then take the comments, the good and the bad and you take your essay or paper and improve it…and turn that into the professor. There were times, though, that the other students were rude and condescending and didn’t really have valid points, just rude, like when someone says your paper sounds like an infomercial, what does that even mean? These comments were unnecessary and the professor didn’t even do anything about it, nothing, just let people rip each other up, with comments that had nothing to do with the class or making your paper better and he just allowed it. That was most definitely the worst experience I had with my online classes.

Allyssa’s comments were reminiscent of a number of other participants in that the student-student interaction aspect of an online class may go wrong and not achieve the teacher’s objective of establishing community on the classroom. In Allyssa’s case, the other students in her English class were rude and aggressive in their comments and were not corrected by the online teacher. This left Allyssa with a negative opinion of online learning. Otter, Seipel, Graeff, Alexander, Boraiko, Gray, and Sadler (2013) found that negative experiences with online classes could be related to the perception that online classes would be easier. In conjunction with this belief was the perception that online classes would be easier due to the fact that they are self-directed with little or no interaction with others (Otter et al., 2013). Kassie experienced these problems with group work in one of her online classes when she commented,

For the group project, we had a student that barely participated and it made the project very difficult. This student did not participate in the discussions online and did not get their portion of their work turned in to everyone on time. This brought us all down. It would have been nice if a portion of our grade was individual or maybe given by the other group members but this class was basically one grade for the whole project. I did not think this was fair. Overall, I think interaction with students is not very important or necessary to my learning and only had a negative effect on me
in relation to online classes.

Kassie experienced a common occurrence and that is that not all students participate at the same level and intensity that everyone else does. She noted that when there is a weak link, it tends to make the group project more difficult when compared to an individual project. Student engagement in group projects and collaborative projects, such as discussion boards, has become a cornerstone in the design of online classes (Dixson, 2012). This concept is included in the design of an online course primarily, due to the desire to replicate the social aspect of a face-to-face class (Lim et al., 2007).

Because of the necessity felt by online teachers to include student collaboration projects, collaboration, discussion boards and group projects, have been studied for their effectiveness in overall online learning of course content. The findings in this study echoed the research that states most online teachers include at least one collaborative project in their class. The findings for this study did not find effective group projects or otherwise, positive feelings towards the collaborative projects.

Overall, the student participants in this study could not establish a rapport with the other students through the group projects and collaborative projects. Frustration, waste of time and unnecessary were terms used throughout the interviews to describe collaborative and group projects assigned in their online classes. Research states that some factors that can make student collaboration in an online class effective include thought provoking questions from the teacher and meaningful assignments that relate to the student’s own life (Dixson, 2012). When the student does not experience thought provoking questions or meaningful content, the likelihood of dissatisfaction is higher.
Dziuban et al. (2013) discussed that there are five elements of student satisfaction with online learning which include “learner relevance, active learning, authentic learning, learner autonomy and technology competence” (p. 2). For the purpose of discussing some of the negative experiences that emerged in the data collection, two concepts will be explored. The first is called learner autonomy, which is related to the absence of interaction with other students and the second is technology competence, which is related to struggles with technology as well as the addition of other websites or technology into a course.

Learner autonomy, as outlined by Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012), is defined as one who is in charge of one’s own learning which would allow for self-direction, where the student can learn entirely on their own. This concept places the responsibility to learn on the student, eliminating passive learning. In regards to learner autonomy, Matt, who enrolled in Psychology 170, felt that his personality lent itself to being an online learner; thereby, being left alone to learn the concepts and subject matter of an online course. However, when the teacher insisted on student-to-student interaction through group projects or discussion boards, Matt felt cheated out of what he thought would be a solitary, self-directed learning online experience. He stated,

I like to be disconnected from people that is kind of how I am. I’m a very quiet, withdrawn person so online classes are perfect for me. I don’t want to say that I’m not a people-person, but I’m close-knit with certain people and everyone else is put at a distance on purpose. So on occasion, my online learning experience is negative in that it has too much interaction with other students. I don’t know how much interaction you need with other people but I know that I just want to be given my assignments and be able to get them done without having to depend on others for my grade, whether that’s through a group project or waiting for someone to post on a discussion board. I just don’t think it adds anything to the class or my understanding of the subject.
Matt believed that online learning would be more solitary and not include interacting with other students. He quickly found out that the lack of campus meetings resulted in an increase in group interaction. He didn’t like the required interaction and felt it did not add to his learning process. Research states that self-directed learning and learner autonomy are closely related and can be closely observed as a factor relating to an online learner’s satisfaction levels (Garrison, 1997). Throughout this study, the participants expressed a need to learn on their own and at their own pace. These concepts are noted in research about self-directed learning and have been called “basic human competence—the ability to learn on one’s own” (Garrison, 1997, p. 19). A comprehensive model developed by Garrison (1997) describes self-directed learning as connecting three dimensions including self-monitoring, self-management, and motivation.

Within these three dimensions, students’ personalities play a role in determining the level of each dimension. The findings in this study found participants who had either internal or external motivation to participate in online classes. Intrinsically, the participant stated they were better learners when left alone and had internal motivation to complete the class ‘teaching themselves’ the concepts. The participants in this study were extrinsically motivated by external factors such as more free time and more time for work and family. Furthermore, the concepts of self-monitoring and self-management are key characteristics in a successful online learner (Knowles & Kerkman, 2014).

Self-monitoring is described as the ability of the learner to take responsibility of a learning task and plan according to reach the goal of that task, whereas self-management is described as the ability of the learner to seek resources and assistance to reach the goal of the learning task such as additional research or content (Garrison, 1997). The participants in this
study discussed situations of self-management in which additional resources were needed and were sought. First, the discussion revolved around the teacher and then shifted to the resources needed from other students. Additionally, self-monitoring emerged in the research when participants stated the preference of being able to design their study plan in accordance with their own schedules and their own learning styles.

The second aspect of learner satisfaction outlined in Dziuban et al. (2013) that related to a negative experience of one of the participants was technology competence. Pena and Yeung (2010) posited that technology competence plays an important role in the satisfaction level of the online learner in that the more skill a student possesses with technology, the higher the satisfaction level will be for the learner. In order to fully understand, comprehend and, in turn, have a positive experience with online learning, the student must possess a certain level of skill with online and computer technology (Anderson, 2008). There are many orientations available for the online learner; however, there seems to be a skill set that is attainable through practice and experience that can lend itself to fulfilling online learning experience (Anderson, 2008).

During the focus group, Connor was specific about the intricacies of having to learn the Canvas learning management system that is used at Rock Valley College, but also how certain teachers add other websites and book publisher’s online learning tools to the class. This, he contends, can lead to a negative online learning experience primarily because of confusion between various learning management systems used in the class. One such event was described during the interview process. Connor stated,

We had assignments in both EAGLE and Pearson Publishing and the material on the Pearson website became an Easter egg hunt for me, very confusing. I had to poke around in numerous places on the various sections of the website and additional pages would show up on that site as the semester progressed. I would always try to work ahead because I never
knew if something would come up for me that would force me to travel. It was extremely frustrating to have to waste time on another site and then find new material on the Pearson Publishing site that would suddenly appear. It became frustrating and led to the professor offering a face-to-face session to explain the differences between EAGLE and Pearson but I could never make it, hence, why I took an online class. More, some tests and assignments were on EAGLE, while other tests and assignments were on the Pearson site. In general, I believe an online class should only have one site to go to get the material.

Connor did not know that online classes at Rock Valley College could include a component that mandated using other websites and materials. Since saving time is typically a primary reason for taking an online course, Connor did not appreciate the additional time he had to spend learning a different learning management system as well as trying to navigate and find where assignments were posted. Han and Johnson (2012) found that students, who had prior technological experience with computers and online classes, were more successful in completing the online course when technology issues did not serve as a distraction. The participant’s in this study found that, even with a base of technology knowledge, when the teacher integrated other websites into the course, it resulted in a negative experience. One such example was when Jose was asked to utilize an outside website during his online class and found it difficult to learn and confusing. He stated,

I did not like an online class that used other websites in the course. It just doesn’t make it conducive to learning the material if you have to worry about all this other stuff like other websites. You might have eight tabs open for one class and then you have to learn the format for the other websites, where everything is, it gets very confusing. I thought if you took a class at Rock Valley, the teacher had to use Eagle. Sometimes it seems like the teacher is just lazy and just using another website already set up for everyone around the country to use. I would rather have the teacher design the online class and make it personal to them and not a pre-designed class that seems impersonal.
Finally, Mitchell pointed out that technology, when defined as using other websites in the online class, can be confusing and complicate the online learning experience. Kinchin (2012) referred to this type of situation as “technology enhanced, non-learning” in that the technology struggle has gotten in the way of the learner grasping the content of the course, resulting in frustration and lower completion of the course (p. E46). Furthermore, a student may have a negative experience with online learning if the subject matter or course content cannot be effectively dispersed via the online format. He stated,

My math class used websites from different companies and I had to buy a separate book just for that part of the class. We didn’t really even use it and it seemed like you were taking a class from a different college. I even asked a question about the other website and my teacher didn’t know the answer. I don’t like that layout.

Lim (2001) stated that self-efficacy, particularly, computer self-efficacy, is related to the students’ belief that they have the ability to successfully use computers. The findings in this study support the notion that the more proficient the participant was in computers and Canvas, the more satisfied the participant was with the overall experience of online learning. Furthermore, the frustration caused both by teachers integrating other websites into the class as well as a general lack of computer knowledge emerged as reasons for negative experiences.

The subject of a class or the content contributed to the participants’ negative experiences when they noted that not all classes can be taken online. The reasons for this outlook was as a result of attempting to take a course online and realizing the differences between subject matter. Lim et al. (2007) list a lack of understanding and a lack of interest in the subject matter as the second and third highest reason for students having lower learning outcomes and lower learner satisfaction in online courses. The only factor that was higher was instructional effectiveness, which is related to the interaction of teacher and student.
There were several participants who cited the reason of difficulty with learning the subject matter online as contributing to their negative experiences in online learning. While Xu and Jaggars (2011) could not cite empirical evidence that certain subject areas are less successful than other subjects in the online format, there was evidence that suggested the online teacher can determine the difficulty of learning the subject matter online. During the focus group, Rachel, who enrolled in Math 115, explained how an online math class became a nightmare for her when she stated,

I would not take another math class online, I can tell you that. It was too difficult and awful. English was difficult but not like this. Math is one of those classes where you have to get immediate feedback and if you don’t and you can’t figure it out by yourself, you are stuck and you cannot move forward. That was so incredibly frustrating. They tell you to come in and use the Math Lab but then, what is the point of an online class? I may as well take a face-to-face class. There needs to be a way for the teacher to answer your questions immediately so you don’t get to the point of drowning or worse yet, failing the course.

Rachel could not have predicted how difficult it was to learn math online and believed that the content or subject matter of what is being online should be considered carefully. The convenience of online learning and its flexible scheduling can be misrepresented if a class is more time consuming when compared to a face-to-face class. Some students believe that an online class does not have to be easier but it should not be more time consuming than a face-to-face class (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). In fact, there were instances where the negative experience students had resulted in an overall negative outlook toward online learning in general. Elizabeth, who enrolled in Sociology 190, had an experience with her Sociology class that almost convinced her not to take any other classes online. She stated,

I took a Sociology class online last semester and it was sub-standard in that, I consider myself to be very self-directed and this teacher assigned way too
many assignments and it was nearly impossible to keep up with the reading and the assignments. My professor was very disorganized and would not give feedback before another assignment was due so you had no idea if you were supposed to complete the assignment the same or if you were supposed to be doing something different. I didn’t feel like Sociology would be a topic I couldn’t understand but the way this class was laid out, I couldn’t grasp the class the way I think I should have. Because of this experience, I am skeptical about Psychology and Sociology classes in the future.

Elizabeth experienced what some other participants attributed to low completion rates in that there were too many assignments and difficult to keep up. Scheduling becomes an issue after the first day, when most students receive their syllabus, in that, students cannot find a comparable class, at the same time, to take. Ley and Gannon-Cook (2014) found that accounting classes and certain English courses were the most unsuccessful subjects taught online in the California community college system. Research asserts that the concept of self-teaching may not work well with certain subject areas (Han & Johnson, 2012). Allison, who also enrolled in Math 115, echoed these sentiments with her experience with a math class online. She explained,

What made the biggest difference in my positive or negative experiences with online learning? That was my math class. This was a negative experience. I don’t know anyone who could learn math online but I tried. The learning process was so difficult and I found myself in my professor’s office almost every day because I needed extra help and could not understand the math class. I had taken other online classes but this was different and made me realize that not every class should be online.

Finally, Karen confirmed the subject matter of math classes being difficult online when she stated, “I think the one class I would never take online would be math since you really need to hear the instructions from a face-to-face teacher and not attempt to teach yourself Algebra and Calculus on your own.” There are many factors that can result in a negative experience for
the online learner including an overabundance of student interaction, learner autonomy, struggles with technology and the incompatibility of the course subject matter with the online learning format.

Platt, Raile, and Yu (2014) found that a great deal of satisfaction and dissatisfaction lies in the student’s perception of the online course. If the expectations of learning and interaction were met, the student will feel a higher sense of satisfaction. Whereas, if any of the above factors enter into the learning experience, the student is likely to feel disappointed and describe their online experience as negative. The first main concept of students’ perception of online learning based upon their own lived experiences and the fact that flexibility is the primary reason for satisfaction in online learning was found in the research.

There were categories found in this study that related to satisfaction and dissatisfaction with online learning which emerged as reasons for their positive and negative experiences. These categories were established as factors affecting the satisfaction level of the participants, both negatively and positively. The second concept that emerged in the findings is that there were factors and reasons students gave as contributing to their decision to take a face-to-face course delivery or online courses. The next section will discuss the notion that the participants in this study preferred face-to-face classes over online classes.

Students’ Perceptions of Online Learning as Compared to Face-to-face

The third major finding to emerge from the data was the notion that student-to-teacher interaction or teaching presence was the most important interaction to this set of participants for reasons including the importance of feedback, facilitation of the course and overall sharing of knowledge. The concept of student-teacher interaction was based primarily around the
community of inquiry theory developed by Garrison et al. (2000) who details the importance of offering the online student a comprehensive learning experience through interaction with the teacher, the content, and other students, also known as social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.

Barrett (2014) found that students preferred to take courses face-to-face; however, due to outside time constraints took the online course as a last resort. While their experience may have been positive, their preferred modality was still face-to-face. Barrett (2014) reported that 19% of the higher education population prefers online learning as the preferred modality, yet, 50% desire a blended class that incorporates both face-to-face and online learning in one course (p. 50). Artino (2010) asserted that face-to-face learning can be the preferred modality of instruction as a result of a past online experience that did not turn out as desired as anticipated by the participant. One such participant who agreed with this sentiment was Cara, who enrolled in Psychology 170, and stated,

I decided to take online classes to have more time outside of class. It was a positive experience, but I definitely enjoy face-to-face classes more for the classroom experience and the fact that the teacher is there to remind you of due dates. There were a lot of times where I would just forget about the due date for something. Usually when you are in class, the due date is repeated to you multiple times. And you have much less interaction with the other students, which I don’t like in an online class. That’s missing.

Cara’s experience with online learning was a positive one; yet, she still recognizes that she enjoys face-to-face learning more. She acknowledged that face-to-face course keep her more on track and she misses student-to-student interaction. Jaggars (2014) posited that students feel that they are teaching themselves in an online class and this is more difficult learning when compared to taking a face-to-face class. She goes on to say those students
gravitate toward easier subjects and stay away from the more difficult courses and save those for face-to-face delivery. Cameron verifies these feelings by stating,

I feel better learning face-to-face, there’s less work compared to an online class. I prefer note-taking in a face-to-face class rather than just listening to podcasts or reading lecture notes. If my schedule wasn’t so strict, I would always take face-to-face classes particularly since some subjects, like math, are way too hard to learn online. Taking notes from a real-live teacher and knowing exactly what to study for, give me a much better chance to learn the material rather than just learning on my own. You also have to be super self-motivated. If you get even a little behind in an online class, you are buried. I appreciate the structure of a face-to-face class, facts, definitions and terms are harder to learn online.

Cameron attributes increased learning in face-to-face classes primarily because he learns more form a live teacher where he can take notes and ask questions. He acknowledged that fact that one must be self-directed and excels in taking control of their time to complete assignments. Only 3% of students enrolled in classes at a college or university chose online classes because they believed the online learning experience would provide them with superior learning experiences (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2014). While participating in the focus group, Jessica noted,

I definitely prefer online classes over face-to-face classes and not just because it makes my schedule easier and allows me to make less trips to campus. I prefer them because I am a self-motivated and self-disciplined student and I can function much more efficiently and quickly when it is me who is making the schedule of when to study and when to read the material. As long as the instructor is available and they respond to any questions I have, it works. I am the type of student who gets annoyed when other students waste my time by asking too many questions or if the teacher goes on and on about a topic and I understood it after five minutes. I just learn better when it’s on my own terms.

Connor, also a participant in the focus group, affirmed this belief by stating, “I personally learn better in an online class because I’m not distracted and I can concentrate on
I don’t find myself daydreaming but instead, I am reading the material and getting my assignments done.” Finally, Dee, who participated in the focus group, stated,

> I would rather do it face-to-face because I like getting to know the teacher and everything. Online is harder because you have to do more work. I took online classes when I could because of my kids, my schedule. Online classes make it so you don’t have to come to class and then I can stay home with my kids and not get a babysitter and just do the work. But I’m a visual learner and I like to take notes, you know lectures and everything. With my notebook, I can study everything and feel like I comprehend more in a face-to-face class. I guess, I basically like the teacher, note taking and being in the classroom better.

When Connor noted that he enjoys getting to know the teacher, he touched on a common complaint of online classes, in that, it is very solitary and isolated. Part of learning, for some participants, included the rapport developed between student and teacher. Overall, participants preferred face-to-face learning over online learning but still discussed the importance of flexibility and convenience. Some of the participants preferred the environment of the online class while others noted the advantage of getting to know the teacher, having immediate feedback in a face-to-face class and the perception that face-to-face classes are easier than online classes, as reasons for the face-to-face modality preference.

> Generally speaking, students prefer face-to-face classes because they can establish a stronger rapport with teachers in a face-to-face class and can also see their friends more in a face-to-face class. (Jaggars, 2014). Furthermore, Castle and McGuire (2010) found that if an online teacher can successfully duplicate the sense of community online that is typically established in a face-to-face class, the result will be that the level of satisfaction for the online student will increase.
In relation to the face-to-face preference stated by the participants, findings from the analysis of the artifact that had students revise structures of a sentence using the grammatical rules of English, revealed that this was an assignment that was typically given in the face-to-face version of this English class and was simply posted online. This provided the findings with an example of why students may prefer face-to-face classes over online classes as the student in a face-to-face class would receive more explanation and lecture regarding this assignment. The comments made by Karen about this assignment included that while she was aware that she was to revise the sentences and then submit them online, she was confused as to the directive to use previously posted information and learned material form the class to help revise the sentences. In this case, Karen felt the assignment would have been easier learned in a face-to-face class where she could have asked questions and received immediate responses.

When asked about the assignment, Karen stated that it was listed on the schedule of assignments with a due date and a note stating they were to “fill out the text box using the examples given in the posted lecture.” In addition to the directions given in the online class, there are also directions before each section such as “Revise the following sentences to eliminate insensitivity toward gender, race, ethnicity, age or disability.” The student was expected to copy and paste the sentences into a Word document, revise them and then submit them as an attachment in the online classroom.

The findings of the English sentence revision artifact would fall into Best Practice #9 which stated that students should “combine core concept learning with customized and personalized learning” (Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka, & Conceicao-Runlee, 2000, p. 6). This means that the teacher decides which concepts must be included in the online class in order to
provide the same resources online as they do in a face-to-face class. In order to meet everyone’s individual learning styles, more information posted is more beneficial than less, as was the case with the English sentence revision assignment.

As Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, and Thompson (2012) noted, the correlation between students’ satisfaction with online courses as compared to face-to-face courses may be debatable. This is primarily due to the fact that students may be relying on the perception that flexibility in schedules equates to a better learning experience; thereby, resulting in a higher level of satisfaction with the course. This may not be the case. Students may be learning the same and getting the same grade in an online course when compared to the same face-to-face course. The overall satisfaction perception may be higher due to other factors such as independence from being required to come to campus or flexibility. Table 3 (below) analyzes the three interactions that took place and the data collected that corresponds to each interaction. Finally, the third concept that emerged in the research involved the community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) and the role that interaction plays in online learning, which included the student-to-teacher interaction, the student-to-student interaction and the student-to-content interaction is discussed with the student-to-teacher interaction component emerging as the most important to this set of community college participants. The above table defines the factors that were described by the participants as contributing, both positively and negatively, in each of the three areas of the community of inquiry theory (see Table 3).
Table 3

Community of inquiry theory analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student-to-teacher Interaction</th>
<th>Student-to-student Interaction</th>
<th>Student-to-content Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td>Personality factors</td>
<td>Content relates to real-life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting the teacher’s insight</td>
<td>Socializing</td>
<td>Interconnectedness to other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving the information</td>
<td>Overall learning</td>
<td>Academic track must relate</td>
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<tr>
<td>necessary for the course</td>
<td>interrupted/impacted</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make interaction productive</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Connectivism</td>
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Student-to-teacher Interaction - Teacher Presence

Teacher presence is another term used in the community of inquiry theory and is defined as “the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Garrison, et al., 2000, p. 92). To be more specific, teacher presence involves “instructional design, facilitating discourse and direct instruction” (Enightoola et al., 2014, p. 83).

Furthermore, most participants felt that there should be a section in the syllabus noting response times and ways to get a hold of the teacher. Timeliness, feedback, and teacher involvement emerged as the primary themes in relation to teacher-to-student interaction. Karen and David reflected on the importance of timeliness. Karen expressed,

Interaction between the student and the teacher is very important. Sometimes it’s through feedback on an assignment and sometimes, it’s just through responding to an email. Either way, it’s an important part of being in an online class. Most of the time, I feel a professor should get back to you within twenty-four hours, but there have been times when I’ve waited a week just to get a response from an email. When they post their syllabus, it should be clear how long we have to wait and what the easiest way is to get a hold of them. Some professors like Facebook better. It’s pretty
important though, that they get back the student quickly.

Karen opened a new conversation about the timeliness of teachers’ responses and represented a pivotal point in the research. The timeliness of responses emerged as a critical facet of online teachers and their establishment of rapport between the student and the teacher. The participants in this study had a specific idea of how involved the teacher should be in an online class. One theme that emerged was that of response timeliness or how quickly a teacher responds. Its importance in a student’s success with online learning emerged as a relevant factor. While twenty-four hours was preferred, the participants stated that they understood that the teacher has outside commitments and would accept a forty-eight hour waiting time for responses to questions and grades. In much of the same perspective of Karen’s expectation of interaction between the teacher and student, David continued to discuss the importance of feedback when he stated,

Getting feedback is important, especially when you have another assignment that is similar and you need to correct what you did wrong. If you don’t get feedback, you won’t know what to correct and probably end up with another bad grade. So, for my personal preference, I would prefer a quick response, probably within twenty-four hours, however, if I need the information for the next assignment, then as soon as possible. There are some teachers who prioritize different items, some get back to you immediately and some don’t. I guess it would also depend on the type of class and the schedule of assignment due dates.

David noted, like Karen, that timeliness in feedback played a critical role in the success of an online student. In fact, he was able to articulate the exact time that teachers should respond in relation to assignments and emails. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) asserted that teaching online can be challenging and that online teacher interaction can fall on a wide spectrum. This spectrum discussed by Sheridan and Kelly (2010) depicted some teachers as having a high level
of interaction as well as engaging in the discussion forums and discussion boards by adding their own opinions and comments. Other teachers who fell lower on the spectrum may simply have posted material and did not actively post announcements or timely feedback.

Research shows that interaction between the teacher and the student in online discussion forums and discussion boards can positively influence the overall satisfaction level of the online student (Cranney, Wallace, Alexander, & Alfano, 2011). Not only do students have higher levels of satisfaction with the online course, but they also feel a motivation to understand and learn the material, subsequently, resulting in higher success in online learning (Cranney et al., 2011). David’s statement related to a comment given by Dee in the focus group when she indicated her value of interacting with the teacher. She explained,

Being able to hear the professor’s insight and experiences with the course helps you to relate to your own life and that makes the information easy to understand. I mean, I went for business administration, so a lot of the courses relate to how I can use it as a manager. The examples that the professor posted about their own experiences in the business world helped me to grasp the concepts of the class. And you didn’t have to hear it first-hand from the professor, posting the written examples in the online classroom was perfect for me. I can use this stuff in real-life situations and I’ve always thought getting this type of information from your teacher makes the difference between enjoying and learning and just being miserable.

Dee was not as interested in the feedback form a teacher as much as she was interested in learning more about the teacher’s viewpoints and opinions. She felt that the posting, or written description, of the teacher’s experiences in relation to the course content, was sufficient and did not need a face-to-face lecture to convey the message. The first interaction a student has with their teacher is typically the syllabus, which can result in a better understanding of the course or can lead to a state of confusion for the student. The syllabus can be the link between the teacher, the student and the content of the class. Puzziferro and Shelton (2014) asserted the
notion that an appropriate syllabus for an online class should include details regarding the
timeline of events (assignment due dates, scheduled face-to-face meetings, and test dates) as
well as course policies, unit explanations, and technology requirements (both skill level and
hardware/software requirements for class).

It was found that this syllabus provided for artifact analysis contained all of these items
as well as additional sections and items for the class. Additional items such as a week-by-week
schedule were provided in addition to a unit calendar that included a day-to-day agenda.
Technical requirements were given with an explanation of what technological skills students
should possess before attempting this class. Computer hardware and software expectations
were explained in this syllabus such as needing a webcam and a Gmail account to record and
upload YouTube videos.

Course policies were included in this syllabus as well as a breakdown of assignments,
assignment explanations and point values. In the case of the syllabus submitted for analysis, the
teacher succeeded in accomplishing a better understanding of the course which was confirmed
by Karen when she said, “We were required to read the syllabus which was clearly laid out so
the student could learn more about the class.”

Dixson (2012) reported in her research that online students can outperform face-to-face
students when there is a strong teacher presence and opportunities for interaction are present in
the online classroom. She goes on to say that online students can learn more and perform at
higher learning levels if active learning strategies are employed (Dixson, 2012). George
believed this concept to be true when he explained,

There is no question the teacher is valuable to the learning process. The
student to teacher interaction is a means to an end, with the end being the
goal of learning the material. I feel the teacher serves as the guide or coach
in the learning environment. The teacher can answer questions for the online student. Teachers can also make additional information available, provide tips to learn the material, perhaps show unexpected connections to previous lessons and provide insights and links to other information. The teacher also must explain the grading rubric and offer exceptions to the syllabus such as change due dates, offer alternative assignments or provide other adaptive assignments. The teacher is the gatekeeper for students being able to proceed to the next chapter or the next quiz or test. I really don’t like when teachers keep assignments or tests and quizzes locked. In other words, I want to move at my own pace online, I don’t want to wait until the teacher unlocks the next assignment. Most importantly, the teacher is the person to provide insight into the relevance of the subject matter to his or her everyday life.

George touched on the critical role that teachers have as an online teacher and emphasized the importance of how establishing a rapport with the teacher can have a direct impact on student success. He noted that teachers are gatekeepers and control the flow of the information, in that, they can determine when students can move ahead and complete upcoming assignments. Furthermore, George believed that the teacher’s role is to get the student from point A to point B with A representing the beginning of the course and point B being the end or completion of the course. By viewing the teacher in this role, George has placed the responsibility of learning with the teacher and the student is simply a depository where the information is placed. Jaggars (2011) found that there was a direct correlation between the amount of interpersonal interaction between a teacher and a student and a higher GPA.

When teaching online, one may forget the importance of soliciting student feedback to combat the frustration of students wanting to move forward in the class. A teacher may assume that by locking a student out, they can keep everyone at a similar pace and run the online class in much of the same way a face-to-face class would run. This common mistake has teachers wondering why a student may not finish a course or receive lower grades as compared to their same face-to-face course (Ragan, Bigatel, Kennan, & Dillon, 2012). Online teachers struggle
with the appropriate format and design of an online class and frequently rely on their face-to-face class for direction (Baran et al., 2011). When moving a class online there are many changes the online teacher must consider in addition to simply changing the method of delivery. Baran et al. (2011) asserted that these changes include rethinking the “cultural, academic, organizational, and pedagogical structures” (p. 421) so as to adapt the new method of delivering a course to meet students’ demands of learning online. Connor commented on the importance of teacher interaction during the focus group when he stated,

I think the accessibility of the professor is what made this online learning experience all the better. Without being able to rely on the fact that my professor took an interest in my learning and willingly answered any and all questions I had, I may not have been able to finish the course. I appreciate the fact that my professor left the learning up to me and my schedule, but was still there to help if need be.

Connor touched on the importance of timeliness and the importance of teacher interaction on an online course. The absence of immediate feedback in an online course can cause some students to want to give up and abandon pursuing the completion of an online course (Jaggars, 2013). When designing a course, the teacher should be aware of the importance of interaction and include a way for the student to interact, not only with the teacher, but also with other students. Because this is a critical interaction and important to the students’ success in online classes, students will feel a higher level of satisfaction with an online class if they feel they were involved with the teacher and could interact freely with the teacher (Enightoola et al., 2014).

Having to provide timely feedback in an electronic online format is a new idea to many teachers which can lead to confusion as to its importance (Ladyshewsky, 2013). By allowing the student to voice their experiences and preferences with online learning, the online learning environment can be transformed to ensure a more positive experience for the online student. In
some cases, students feel the timeliness of the teacher’s response can directly affect how well they do on assignments and discussion boards (Ladyshewsky, 2013). In some cases, the feedback was more important than the grade received as it was viewed as a direct link to understanding the content of the course as well as direction for future assignments. As demonstrated in the several personal accounts documented in this section, students view the student-teacher relationship as critical to the success and satisfaction level of the online course.

Student-to-Student Interaction – Social presence

Enightoola et al. (2014) posited that there is a mixture of reactions to student-student interaction in an online class. They noted that one student felt very comfortable communicating with other students online and even felt that it provided a way to make new friends while another student did not appreciate the online environment and preferred taking classes online where they could interact face-to-face. Some even felt that the online environment provided a shelter to those students who used it as an avenue to criticize other students or make fun of others for their answers and dumb questions (Enightoola et al., 2014). This study found that personality, the impact to the overall learning in the class and making the interaction between students productive were the primary themes that emerged in relation to student-to-student interaction.

Personality

Elizabeth was the first to point out that one’s personality may lead them to online learning as it gives the student who is more withdrawn and shy an opportunity to learn on their terms. Elizabeth stated, “I think what attracted me to online courses was that I am generally
withdrawn and quiet and I would rather not interact with anyone when I’m trying to learn.”

Mitchell noted that he is a student who prefers to learn alone and does not need a great deal of interaction with other students when he stated,

I don’t think it’s important to have student-student interaction. Only if you have a problem with a concept. All of the online classes, for the most part, have a discussion board. Not all have student-student responses required. I just feel like it’s a better class if you’re not pre-occupied with busy work that doesn’t teach you anything, which is what I think of discussion boards and having to interact with other students in the class. I don’t think the discussion boards are very important. Interacting with other students is not why people take online classes, more for the flexibility for your schedule.

Mitchell represented the student who does not respond well to student-student interaction and might possess a personality that prefers online learning as an isolated and individual learning experience. Keller and Karau (2013) found that analyzing different types of students and their personalities might give insight into more effective design of online classes. In their research, Keller and Karau (2013) theorized that there are five dimensions to personality which can affect the success in online classes and include “conscientiousness, openness, agreeableness, extraversion, and emotional stability” (p. 2495).

It was found that high scores in both agreeableness and openness were predictors of how well a student might do in an online class. These traits are important qualities to possess when attempting to communicate online with other students in group projects or discussion boards. This may the reason why so many students preferred isolation and working alone over student-student interaction. Furthermore, scoring high in consciousness was noted as being a critical factor in both online and face-to-face learning and represents the student who makes an effort in learning and completing assignments. During the focus group, Jessica and Dee
compared their views on personality having an impact in regards to online learning. First
Jessica explained,

Not socializing in real time with live humans can either be a plus or a minus, depending on the type of person you are. Often, on-campus class interaction can be stimulating for some but make others socially uncomfortable and be a learning distraction. Conversely, online interaction can be equally stimulating but may make some feel very isolated compared to live classes.

As evidenced by the previously mentioned testimonials of student online experiences in relation to personality styles affecting online learning, it appears that the definition of online learning can vary from student to student. This important factor can influence the way the online teacher approaches course design and understands that these different personality types exist. Subsequently, the online teacher can redesign and adjust the classroom to accommodate the different personality styles.

Research posits the importance of designing courses to full encompass all personality traits is valuable to the success of online learning and to the success of the online student as it relates to completion and retention in these courses (Keller & Karau, 2013). Dee added to the conversation regarding personality and online learning. She felt that online courses could actually help those who feel socially awkward trying to communicate face-to-face when she explained,

I feel it’s important to at least try to interact with other students online, especially if there is a group project or mandatory discussion boards. Participation in an online class may help shy students come out of their shell since it is less intimidating communicating online compared to face-to-face classes. Online classes give opportunities for students to talk to each other that is minimally threatening to the not so social student.
Dee demonstrated a key reason why students may feel dissatisfied with their online learning experience or online learning, in general. While she may feel comfortable talking to other students and engaging in student-student interaction, others obviously do not and may even want to learn online in hopes that they do not have to interact at all with anyone else. Xu and Jaggars (2011) found that some students feel anxious and overwhelmed in a face-to-face setting and desire to self-educate through self-directed learning. Additionally, they found that students are required to participate in group projects and group discussion more frequently in an online class when compared to a face-to-face class.

Because online group projects necessitate a student to increase their use of emotions, this may prove too much for them and they may not have a positive online learning experience. Xu and Jaggars (2011) found that creating emotions such as (a) positive emotions or when one encourages group members to participate, or (b) eliminating inhibiting emotions, such as anxiety and finally, (c) engaging in “down-regulating unpleasant emotions,” (p. 1), can result in some students feeling overwhelmed. This might result in avoiding a negative online experience (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Some students’ personalities simply dictated the need for a more solitude approach to the online class.

**Overall Learning Impacted**

Some participants felt their overall learning was impacted in a negative way from having too much interaction with other students. Rachel, a focus group participant, reflected on a bad experience with another student in an online class when she stated, “I just want the student-student interaction to be helpful and mean comments are just not helpful. Sometimes, it
seems being online gives students an excuse to be mean”. When hearing this comment, Connor offered his opinion on student-student interaction when he stated,

Many student-to-student online exercises seem to be a requirement that does not contribute to learning the material or finding relevance in the subject matter. To me, it seems to be a requirement for every online class. The teacher focused on the student simply being able to write a few sentences that do not involve thought which, in turn would simply allow the teacher to check a box that they have something in their classroom that involves students interacting with each other. I saw some value in the initial posting of student’s comments but I now see zero value in reading and responding to other students’ comments in an online class. Requirements would be stated something like, ‘You must post your answer and respond to at least two other students answers.’ I have and never will learn anything additional by doing this. It needs to be eliminated form online classes.

Connor noted the lack of importance responding to other students’ postings can be and that he doesn’t see the value or necessity in discussion boards. Research shows that online students feel frustration when the overall impression of group projects emerges as unnecessary and simply included in an online class as a means to replicate the social interaction found in a face-to-face class (Goold, Craig, & Coldwell, 2008). Some participants felt that teachers pushed the group projects in an attempt to teach the importance of working together. Cameron agreed with Connor’s sentiment of not understanding the value of student-to-student interaction when he explained,

I think group projects could be good if everyone works together. Unfortunately, the groups I have worked in are not cooperative and actually make learning harder and more stressful. This type of interaction is not important to my learning and makes me feel like I’m babysitting. I have heard teachers explain that we must learn to work together and that this is a good forum to hone our skills by working with others online but I don’t see it. I would rather do another assignment rather than the group project.

As online classes became more popular, the need for quality design of online cases became apparent (Plante & Asselin, 2014). The notion of creating social presence through
group work developed as an alternative to face-to-face discussions and activities.

Unfortunately, the group work approach did not take into consideration that the overall learning might be impacted and negatively altered. This occurred mainly as a result of not understanding that some students do not wish to engage in interpersonal communication online or that they would enjoy working with others (Plante & Asselin, 2014). George was in agreement with Cameron and Connor in regards to having student-to-student interaction negatively impact the overall learning experience when he stated,

\[
\text{I do not think student-to-student interaction is important to me and doesn’t seem to accomplish much. Mostly because I see them as time consuming and taking away from time I could be learning more about the subject of the class. I really don’t understand the whole concept of them. I know the teacher may believe that they have to include them in online classes but I don’t see the need to make us discuss concepts or theories or questions from the class in discussion boards, as if they are forcing us to be social, when in reality, you don’t do any of that in face-to-face classes.}
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This study uncovered many reasons why students may have negative experiences with student-student interaction and social presence in online classes. Some participants felt that there was an overload of interaction required between students while others felt that personality influenced how students approached learning online. While much of the research suggests that social interaction is a key component to the success of an online learner (Croxton, 2014), the greater need lies in online teachers understanding the importance of course design and integration of all personality and learning types into the course.

Making Interaction Productive

When considering the impact of student-to-student interaction, David felt the need for more forums through which students could interact. Research shows that the more engaged a
student is in an online class, the more the student will find their online learning experience to be positive which is based on the social cognitive theory which posits the necessity of human interaction in order to achieve knowledge (Croxton, 2014).

David gave his suggestion when he stated, “I would try to promote student interaction by providing a format for conversations that if students wanted, they could use instead of the discussion boards. Like provide a chat room or something so that the information would always be there for students to tap into if they needed it.” Allyssa agreed with David, in that, she felt the need to make interaction between students more productive and worthwhile. While she wasn’t completely opposed to student interaction, she had some reservations when she explained,

I just feel that people were kind of rushed with discussion boards and such. They would wait until the last minute to do it and I feel like it didn’t really serve its purpose that much, especially, for the students who posted right away. It’s supposed to be interaction that keeps you interactive with the class and give you a different point of view. I think most professors are hoping that you can learn from others and their different points of view, but it can’t achieve that goal if students are waiting until the last minute and not utilizing the discussion boards correctly.

Finally, Karen was dismayed by the current procedure developed by most online teachers in regards to discussion boards and student interaction. She explained that student-to-student interaction has the potential to increase learning in the online class. She was encouraged by the concept of discussion boards but felt the teacher could manage the format of them so that they were useful and productive in the online learning process. Karen stated,

I hate to think that I would be complicating the system but I think that maybe a rubric as to how the professors grade the discussions to make sure that the student becomes more thoughtful about the content they are posting. I think it would be better that just telling them to post an answer and respond to another post. It would make students think about what they
are writing down rather than just waiting until the last minute and writing whatever they think of to answer the questions. If they really put thought into their answers, we could really get a different perspective and thoughtfully reflect on everyone’s answers and possibly, learn something new.

Lastly, a discussion board assignment was submitted for artifact analysis. Discussion boards are typically the forum online teachers will use as a replacement for student-student interaction that is in a face-to-face classroom (Croxton, 2014). In regards to this artifact, this online classroom had directions for completing this assignment online as well as the option to print the actual assignment posted, which was an attachment. Information pertaining to the discussion board requirements was provided at the top of the handout and included the due date and time for the discussion post to be completed, the length of the response to the question, and the peer response requirement.

As previously stated, discussion boards are a common method used by online teachers to foster community and promote student-to-student interaction; therefore, this was an expected artifact piece. This study found that using online discussion boards was a positive addition to the online classroom in that it promoted collaboration as well as encouraged reflective and critical thinking through the responses to other students (Kupczynski, Mundy, Goswami, & Meling, 2014). In some cases, group projects and discussion boards are not the appropriate approach and teachers should focus on allowing the individual to complete and demonstrate assignments distinctive that particular course (Kupczynski et al., 2014).

Capdeferro and Romero (2012) found that many college students felt frustration when they were forced to interact with other students. In fact, their research used the term computer supported collaborative learning or CSCL which was defined as students using online learning in a collaborative fashion to complete case studies, discussion boards as a means to establish
learning communities (p. 1). The two explanations cited as reasons for the frustration were delay of interaction from other students and lack of feedback from other students or the teacher (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012).

Student-to-Content Interaction – Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is the process of creating meaning from the material or content of the course and is related to the study of student-content interaction. Garrison et al. (2000) believed that a student can arrive at conclusions and solutions if there is an interest in the ideas and a commitment to exploring and reflecting on those ideas. In this study, student to content interaction included factors such as relatability, having the content of the course contain an application to real life and interconnectedness to other courses. Additionally, the artifacts collected in this study are discussed as to their relation to student-to-content interaction.

Relatability

Garrison et al. (2000) defined student-to-content interaction the condition of online learning that involves the student and how they interact with the content, assignments, and subject matter of a course. Relatability emerged as the primary component the participants cited as directly affecting the student-content interaction of their online experience. George found that the ability to relate to the content of the course was a valuable addition to his online learning experience. He explained,

I find it very important to relate to the content of the course. If I do not understand something, I will often get confused and be unable to complete my work. If the topic is something relatable, I find it very easy to write about because I can tell others about my experiences and also learn about other students’ experiences. I appreciate when a teacher
allows us to include personal examples in our answers.

George learned the value of interacting with other students when he participated in a course that he could relate to. Once the content became relatable, George was able to relate to other students as well as appreciate if a teacher includes discussion boards in the classroom. Since constructivism is based on the premise that learners build on their knowledge from their own experiences and the experiences of others, it would seem logical that many participants described the need for relatability and integration of real-life application into their online courses.

Siemens (2014) defined a concept titled connectivism as finding a way to connect knowledge through a variety of sources including real-life experiences. Establishing a connection, between course content and the participant’s real life, emerged as a key factor in determining the satisfaction of an online student. Connor, who participated in the focus group, felt that the relatability of the course to one’s own life can help in the learning process when he stated,

> I always think that is easier for students to do well in school when they can relate to the subject matter. With a class dealing with psychology or communication, it seems the content could relate to everyone and make the class exciting by sharing personal experiences and stories. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve emailed a family member or friend something I found interesting in an online class because I thought it was relatable and others would enjoy it, others outside of class. Having the information electronic in an online class made it easy to share with others and subsequently, learn more from the class.

Connor felt that relatability and the sharing of his own experiences with other students a central factor when attempting to succeed in an online class. Furthermore, the ease of forwarding information to others added to his satisfaction level and made the information more closely
related to activities that he typically completes online in his everyday life. The basis of constructivism is the fact that students can share personal experiences with each other; thereby, learning from others as well as engaging in a sharing experience (Siemens, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978).

Real Life Application

Connectivism is defined as learning that begins with the individual and has “an intense focus on the networked and shared experience,” (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012, p. 127). This theory posits that the learner has an increased chance of satisfaction in online courses if there exists a real-life application of the material (Siemens, 2014; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). Catherine felt that the more the content could be tied to her own life, the easier the learning process would be. In fact, she pointed out that the absence of a real person in the classroom could be replaced by applying the content of the class to real life scenarios. Catherine, who enrolled in Mass Communication 251 which is a film history class, explained,

I would always prefer to be able to do activities or assignments that are real-life based rather than based on the information in the text. I like to learn the material in the text and then apply it to my life. This makes writing about the material easier and I feel that I understand the concept better when I can see how it is used in the real world or, if I have to demonstrate how the concept is used in the real world. This takes the place of having a live teacher explain the concepts to me.

At times, the expectation Allison placed upon real-life application was confusing to her, in that, Allison believed a criminal justice class would be interesting to her and easy to apply to the content to her own life. Unfortunately, she was mistaken when she took the class and could
not apply the lessons to her real life as a result of how the teacher approached the activities and tried to relate them to the real life. Allison, who enrolled in Criminal Justice 101, explained,

I’m not sure why I thought taking a criminal justice class would be easy and I could connect the information to my real life but I guess it depends on how you are expected to connect it to your real life. I thought I could get into it but I just could not sync up with that class and how the professor wanted us to apply the discussions and other assignments to our lives. I think that most of the students were studying to be cops and I just wanted to gain information about people to help with my nursing degree. I just could not do it and it became really boring.

Allison echoed the notion that research has established a need to relate the material or content of a course to one’s own real life. From the basis of constructivism, connectivism took shape in the massive open online courses as a critical component in retaining students in online courses (Siemens, 2014). Although this study was limited to community college students, the idea that students need to feel connected to others and to the course content developed.

Interconnectedness

Finding a way to connect the content of a course to a student’s real life can be tricky and overwhelming for an online teacher (Plante & Asselin, 2014). Yet, the basis of most experiential learning theorists is that the learner must be able to apply the subject matter to real life situations (Beckem & Watkins, 2012). One reason the online teacher may not be able to effectively and appropriately integrate real life situations into the online course can be that there is a great “focus on the learner and concern for the learner’s experience to be meaningful, engaging, and transferable to the real world,” (Beckem & Watkins, 2012, p. 62).

Kassie commented that there is a need for classes to interconnect and lead from one class to another, in a logical flow. In her case, she was referring to science classes and the
inability to see the relation to other science classes she had taken. In fact, she felt that had the interconnectedness existed, the content may have been easier to grasp. Kassie explained,

I actually dropped a course for the first time in my college career this semester. I attempted a heredity class, the material proved to be more than I could wrap my head around without in class lecture. There are just some things that I can’t pick up on without some face-to-face time, which is the big difference in online learning. I felt that if heredity had been able to tie the information to previous science classes I had taken or maybe included podcast lectures, I would have had an easier time.

Kassie determined that face-to-face classes are better suited for her if the course content proves to be too hard to learn simply from online lectures or online notes about the concepts. There is a theory in learning called problem based learning in which the student is expected to apply an educational scenario to their real lives and design solutions based on the concepts learned in class and applied to the scenario (Savery, 2015).

This concept has been around a while but is taking shape in the online learning community as a means to enhance the student’s understanding and experience of online course material. The expectation for interconnectedness between similar classes and to build upon each other was not just shared by Kassie but also by Elizabeth, who felt her science classes should relate to other science classes she had taken and build from one class to the next. She stated,

I took classes about how the body works and the body itself, mostly in Biology, like Anatomy and Physiology but when I expanded into other science classes, like Chemistry, I thought this should be pretty good because I really liked my Biology classes. I have always liked science classes and found them to be somewhat connected but Chemistry really threw me. I got far behind and then my daughter got sick and I couldn’t really rely on any other classes to help me through. It was completely different.
Elizabeth was a bit confused when she registered for a science class, thinking it was in a pattern or track, and would be similar to the science classes she had already completed. She was disappointed to find out that the science classes were not related but rather, different from other science classes. The concept of relatability and interconnectedness holding a significant role in online learning was shared by many participants. Rachel, a participant in the focus group, recognized the importance of relatability to a topic or course content. She felt that one’s academic career should not be a series of unrelated courses but rather a culmination of various courses and topics that one could synthesize together to make a well-rounded educational experience. She stated,

The content of the class has to be something that I can build on so that when I learn more of that subject in the future, I can relate it back to what I previously learned. It always helps when you can relate the content of the course to your real life. I would rather learn to the point of fully understanding the topic before I move on to another class. I would also like to see all of my courses related in some way to make the content easier to remember. I can learn things to memorize it but I would rather learn it, not just be able to recite it back to the teacher. I want it to stay with me. This is what we are here in college for, to learn the content of the course, not to interact with the teacher or other students. I want to be able to relate to the material.

Rachel’s understanding of interconnectedness is more closely related to an academic track of a university, in that, one typically completes a course load that includes classes that are similar and can connect to each other. This interconnectedness results in a comprehensive degree through which the student gains a complete understanding of the topic or study area. Research shows that interaction is valued among online learners, particularly the presence of the teacher in regards to feedback and timely responses (Ley & Gannon-Cook, 2014). Therefore, research states that the responsibility of establishing successful interaction, in terms of learning, rests on
the teacher successfully designing an online course. Components critical to this success include active teacher interaction in the online classroom and effective student-student interpersonal interactions (Ley & Gannon-Cook, 2014).

**Artifacts and Student-Content Interaction**

By utilizing Garrison et al. (2000) criteria of triggering event, exploration, and integration, the analysis of the artifacts can give a clear understanding of the responses regarding content interaction in an online class. Thereby, after analyzing the remaining artifacts, the natural association of content or cognitive presence when compared to content-student interaction emerged.

The chapter summary artifact submitted by Jose was analyzed as an assignment that was an example of individualized learning with little or no contact between the teacher and the student or between the student and other students; thereby, qualifying it for a student-content interaction analysis. A novel was assigned to read and chapter questions were provided to the student to answer based on the information in the novel. There were neither reflective nor opinion-based questions in this assignment, instead focusing on knowledge of the content of the course in order to achieve a specific learning objective.

Some examples of questions the student were required to answer for this assignment included “How does the narrator begin this story?” and “Who is Walter Sokolow and what has happened to his family?” The students were instructed to record their answers in a Word document and then upload the document in the online classroom under the module titled Assignments. Jose felt this assignment was impersonal and while content was covered in the chapter summary assignment, there was little to no interaction with others or the teacher in the
Jose went on to say that, “The chapter summaries were necessary to learn the material but felt very boring without teacher lecture or interaction.”

Next, George provided a paper written for a literature class that introduced the students to fiction. The parameters for the paper were posted under assignments with a detailed list of what was to be covered in the paper. Standard writing was required in that there was an introduction including a general thesis statement, body with at least three paragraphs and a conclusion. Outside sources were not needed to write this paper as it was reflective in nature and encouraged personal interpretation. Page length and grammatical requirements were provided for the student in the assignment section of the online classroom. This particular paper submitted to this study exceeded the page length requirement. George felt that his experience with the paper assignment in relation to student-content interaction was positive when he stated, “The parameters for the paper were clearly explained and made the material easy to understand. Also, it was an effective way to use the terms learned in class.”

This study found that papers assigned in an online class can be tricky since the verbal lectures are missing and students are expected to complete assignments from reading online typed lectures and listening to podcasts (Amelink & Hall, 2012). It was found that online teachers should divide the paper into division of work, such as a first draft, then a revision, and lastly, a final, so that the student has an opportunity to catch mistakes before the final draft is turned in (Amelink & Hall, 2012).

Throughout this study, a large number of participants believed that interaction between a student and the content of the course is the second most important interaction that can take place with student-teacher being the most important and student-student being the least important. The artifacts collects, as well as the participant’s comments demonstrated a range of
successful student-content interaction as well as assignments that were not as effective in the participant’s learning process.

Summary

In summary, chapter four discussed the community of inquiry theory and how it provided specific content areas that were used as a basis for the research questions. This analysis included student-to-student interaction or social presence, student-to-teacher interaction or teacher presence, and student-to-content interaction or cognitive presence. This chapter provided a breakdown of the research questions and substantiated the findings with participant quotes, which were presented and analyzed. Studies agree that flexibility and scheduling convenience are the main reasons community college will take an online class (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2014; Jaggars, 2014).

The findings in this study have confirmed previous research that students’ schedules and need for flexibility supersede other learning needs including the preference to take classes face-to-face. This study also provided an in-depth analysis of the community of inquiry theory and used its model to investigate the importance of student-student, student-teacher, and student-content interaction. Chapter five will interpret the findings of the research data and provide implications for future research and practice.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter five delineates the findings from chapter four by making larger implications as to the satisfaction of online students. This chapter relates the findings of this study to the established research of student satisfaction with online learning. This chapter provides recommendations for future research and course design based on the implications and conclusions drawn from the original research conducted throughout this study. There were three key concepts that emerged in the research regarding satisfaction with community college online learning.

The key topics discussed were (a) factors leading to satisfaction with online learning, (b) differences between face-to-face and online learning from a community college student’s perspective, and finally, (c) the community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) paradigm as a necessity to satisfaction with online learning. Online education is quickly becoming highly acceptable in higher education and an expected offering to community college students as an alternative to face-to-face classes (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2014). Because of this importance in online learning, this chapter will recommend future research and will base these conclusions on this study’s original research as compared to published research on the topic of student satisfaction with online learning.
The primary focus of the recommendations is to advance online learning and student satisfaction as a means to promote retention and completion in online classes in higher education. The findings illustrate an overarching conclusion that teacher interaction in an online course, whether through course design, facilitation or feedback, can positively impact a community college student’s online learning experience. This finding suggests that flexibility may not be the only reason a student chooses an online classes over face-to-face classes as previous research has suggested as a primary reason (Han & Johnson, 2012; Jaggars, 2014).

This chapter is divided into the following sections (a) summary of the study, (b) review of the findings, (c) conclusions, implications with recommendations for practice, and finally, (d) suggestions for future research.

The purpose of this study was to investigate community college students’ perception of online courses through an in-depth examination of their shared experiences of online learning. This was done through extensive research utilizing triangulation of personal interviews, a focus group, and collection of artifacts. The community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) was used as a theoretical framework from which to determine satisfaction of community college students. In addition to utilizing the community of inquiry theory concepts of interaction, an examination of the factors contributing to online learning satisfaction was investigated as well as an analysis of the narrated experiences of online learning as compared to face-to-face learning.

The goal of this study was to better understand online learning from a student’s viewpoint so as to better design courses and increase student participation and satisfaction. The research questions that guided this study were,
RQ1: How do community college students, who have participated in online courses, describe their online learning experience?

RQ2: What are the community college students’ perceptions of online learning when compared to face-to-face learning?

RQ3: How do community college students describe their personal satisfaction with an online course in terms of (a) interaction with the teacher, (b) interaction with other students in an online course, and (c) interaction with the content or subject of the course?

The participants for the study consisted of 15 individuals for the interviews, four individuals for the focus group. Documents were collected from the participants that contributed to the artifact analysis portion of the study. Finally, best practices of Rock Valley College’s distance learning policies were analyzed as a means to contribute to the interpretation of exemplar online courses to contribute to the implications for online learning.

Review of Findings

In regards to the participants’ described online learning experience, the findings supported the notion that flexibility is the primary reason students gravitate towards online classes and can result in satisfaction due to the fact that their schedules are freed up, making them less stressed. Second, in regards to a participant’s preference of online learning as compared to face-to-face learning, the findings supported the preference that most students in this study prefer face-to-face learning, and lastly, in regards to interaction, the findings supported the notion that the most important type of interaction is student-to-teacher interaction.
Previous findings from various researchers have supported the notion that community college students identify flexibility as being one of the main reasons to take an online class and this study affirmed this assertion (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Sahin & Shelley, 2008; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Overall, the theme of teacher involvement in the online learning experience emerged as a key finding. The shared experiences of the individual participants as well as the focus group participants confirmed this notion of teacher interaction as a key factor in the satisfaction levels of community college students and their online learning.

This finding also confirmed the relevance of the community of inquiry theory (Garrison et al., 2000) and its implications for further study into the idea of interaction playing a vital role in online learning. Throughout the interviews, the participants stated their reliance on the teacher’s knowledge and command of the online classroom. This was particularly evident when the students would give an overall impression of their satisfaction levels with online learning.

Chickering and Gamson (1999) designed the Seven Principles of Good Practice that incorporate the teacher’s important role in online learning. The two principles most closely related to this concept are “Good practice encourages contact between students and faculty” and “Good practice gives prompt feedback” (p. 77). Puzziferro and Shelton (2014) believed that a “constructivist, active and authentic” approach to online learning utilizing active learning activities and community based environments result in the most effective and satisfying online learning environments for higher education (p. 123).

While there was a group of students who stated their satisfaction did not take priority over the teacher’s personal and professional life, some felt that the teacher could make or break the positive experience of online learning. In fact, students had difficulty accepting that the
teacher should be responsible for getting back to them on the weekends as that should, according to the participants, be family and personal time for the teachers.

This concern did not overshadow the fact that course design, which is directly related to the skills of the teachers setting up the course, was stated as being critical to the academic experience of online classes and was not consistent throughout the college. In other words, some classes expected the student to participate in discussion boards while others expected the students to simply post answers to pre-designated questions, typically found at the end of the chapter. This also supports the student-student interaction concept of the community of inquiry model in that a student can take part in some form of collaboration with other students in the class.

An implication of this finding is that although some trained online teachers may assume they are encouraging collaboration in the online classroom through their activities and assignments, some students feel that very few stop to investigate whether there is a depth and understanding to the activity or assignment. Therefore, if a student feels the discussion boards are a waste of their time, the student may not have an overall satisfactory experience with online learning. If a student feels their efforts are worthwhile and the activity or assignment yields knowledge, then the student has a satisfactory experience. The perceptions of the participants were that the overall goal might be that the student feels a “personal and emotional connection to the subject, their professor and their peers” (Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011, p. 520).

How can online teachers accomplish this task? Rather than designing discussion boards as the only means to collaborate and communicate, allow the students in the class to design a communication blog either through the learning management system or through another outside
internet site such as Facebook (Brinthaupt et al., 2011). Another suggestion is to design an assignment in which a problem must be solved, particularly one that might be common to the demographic make-up of the class (Amelink & Hall, 2012).

One example would be to group the students in separate groups and make them a mock task committee for the community college in which they must define and address the problems facing community college students. Next, the task force would determine how to retain the student so that they can complete a degree. Herbert (2006) posited that there is a cause and effect relationship between an unhappy online learner and student retention. Furthermore, this research documented certain institutional determinants that would ultimately lead to a student’s negative or positive perception of online classes including interaction.

Three conclusions emerged from the research that directly related to the research questions which were (a) community college online students need flexibility, (b) community college online students prefer learning face-to-face, and (c) in terms of interaction, community college online students prioritize teacher-student interaction. Conclusion number one was the finding that students typically enroll in an online class for flexibility purposes. The second conclusion revolved around the finding that when able to choose online or face-to-face, students will typically choose face-to-face, and finally, the third conclusion is that the most important component of the community of inquiry model was the student-teacher interaction, in that, students relied the most on the teacher of the online course for the anticipated satisfaction and knowledge acquisition of the course.
Community College Online Students Need Flexibility

Research Question #1 asked how community college students who have participated in online courses, narrate their online learning experience. The conclusion drawn from the research showed that students participating in this study narrated their experience as positive or negative based on how the issue of flexibility was met and also how engaged they were with the teacher. Fish and Snodgrass (2014) posited that flexibility may contribute to the student’s decision making process degree that factor when deciding between online and face-to-face classes.

Specifically, if a student can save gas money and time by choosing an online class and the online class delivers that assurance, then the student generally has a positive experience based on the flexibility factor alone. There is also the independence that one receives when taking an online class rather than a face-to-face class. The goal of this research was to analyze community college online students’ perception of satisfaction with online learning and while several reasons emerged as contributing to having a positive experience, flexibility was an issue that was mentioned throughout the research study.

Since flexibility was a recurring theme for each participant, the conclusion was drawn that flexibility was a major reason to not only take an online class but was also a factor in the overall satisfaction of the course. In some instances, participants were not happy when the experience was marred by unnecessary assignments that the participants felt wasted time or by a lack of teacher involvement and interaction in the class. Often, participating students identified student-student interaction through discussion boards and group projects, as a waste of time and not productive in their learning. In fact, participants stated that online learning
afforded a certain autonomy that a face-to-face class could not give to them. The conclusion drawn from this meant that many desired the isolation and lack of student interaction that is prevalent in online classes. This is a contrast to the weekly face-to-face interaction experienced in a face-to-face class.

Han and Johnson (2012) found that students with a higher degree of emotional intelligence or the ability to perceive emotion at higher levels have a higher bond and a natural tendency to form emotional bonds in a learning environment. Han and Johnson (2012) posited that students with lower levels of emotional intelligence participated more in the online chats and synchronous lectures over the higher level of emotional intelligence students. This discrepancy led to their conclusion that emotional intelligence doesn’t necessarily lead to satisfactory online learning and that emotional intelligence does not have a significant impact on online learning.

Community College Online Students Prefer Face-to-face Classes

Research question #2 asked what the community college students’ perception of online learning was when compared to face-to-face learning. Puzziferro and Shelton (2014) cited statistics that confirm the findings in this study including the fact that while 54% of surveyed community college students will take an online class, only 5% of the community college student population is taking all of their classes in an online format.

Furthermore, 41% of community college preferred to take fewer classes online but their schedules did not allow for face-to-face classes. Lastly, the study found that 39% of community college students surveyed felt that online classes are harder and that 61% of surveyed
community college students felt that online classes require more discipline when compared to face-to-face classes (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2014).

The goal of research question #2 was to determine the community college students’ perception of online learning compared to face-to-face learning. The participants stated that the preferred delivery method for their classes was face-to-face but that online classes offered flexibility and convenience. In addition to flexibility and convenience, the research shows that time efficiency is a major consideration for the community college as they choose between face-to-face classes and online classes (Jaggars, 2014).

To summarize, the following statements represent common themes described by the participants in this study in relation to online learning as compared to face-to-face learning.

- The participants had all attempted one online class but still took the majority of their classes face-to-face.
- Some participants would rather take face-to-face classes but felt the convenience and flexibility of online classes was too much to pass up.
- The participants commented on the difficulty of the online class being harder when compared to the face-to-face version. This was not as a result of the rigor of the course but due to factors specific to online courses such as difficulty in self-directed learning and lack of teacher involvement.
- The participants used terms such as self-discipline, self-directed learning, and self-motivated were used throughout the study by numerous participants as ways to describe the successful online student. These characteristics were perceived as secondary necessities to a face-to-face learner.
Community College Online Students Prioritize Teacher-Student Interaction

Research question #3 asked how the community college student narrates their personal success with an online course in terms of interaction with the teacher, other students, and the content of the course. Designing an online course and facilitating online discussions have become the topic of discussions for online teachers as a means to attain best practice in online learning (Ladyshewsky, 2013). Research shows that there are specific items that can lead to higher levels of student satisfaction in online learning. They include timely feedback, supporting students through online communication, chunking or breaking up lessons, establishing an online environment in which the student feels comfortable, group activities, and online assessment tools (Pagliari, Batts, & McFadden, 2009, p. 124).

Throughout the research, including the interviews, the focus group and the artifact analysis, the theme of the importance of teacher role and teacher presence emerged. The pattern became that the participants believed that the teacher is the critical connection between the class and the satisfaction levels of the community college student. Since it is the teacher who is ultimately in charge of the design, facilitation and implementation of the online course, this piece of evidence becomes crucial for future research as well as current best practice of teaching online (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).

Sheridan and Kelly (2010) established that the maintenance of “sense of community” (p. 9) as well as the sense that the teacher is facilitating discussion boards and contributing personal thoughts and experiences to correlate the subject matter to real life experiences. Furthermore, in addition to being an active member in the online classroom, this study revealed that community college students expressed a need for immediate feedback and stated time
limits of twenty-four to forty-eight hours as a maximum amount of elapsed time before expecting a response to an email or grade report.

Ladyshewsky (2013) confirmed that teacher immediacy is a critical factor in evaluating student satisfaction and can overshadow the need for student-student interaction, which is sometimes considered to be the most important factor in designing an online class (Ladyshewsky, 2013; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Research also posits that verbal feedback can enhance the student’s understanding of the material as well as provide a way for the online teacher to personally reach the college student (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007). In this study, the participants agreed that without teacher involvement and facilitation, the class is easy to forget about. The lack of teacher involvement may lead to the student dropping the class or not completing it. Furthermore, the participants felt that the most noticeable component absent in an online course, that is present in a face-to-face class, is the teacher. The participants stated that the absence of other students was not as critical to the satisfaction and success of their online learning experience.

Practical Implications

The results of this study and the analysis of the data will extend the understanding of online learning but will also stress the importance of student-teacher interaction and how teacher presence is critical to the satisfaction outcome of an online learner. This study suggests ways to support this development in online learning, which is significant to the field of online education and higher education (Swan & Shih, 2011). This study can contribute to the current issues of community college student satisfaction with online learning as well as future research needed in this area.
More specifically, the findings in this study suggest the importance of teacher-student interaction and teacher presence; therefore, the recommendation of training and further education to teach online teachers how to teach online is necessary. Furthermore, an analysis of best practices in online course design as well as the effectiveness of teacher presence is warranted (Plante & Asselin, 2014). Recommendations for practical application of the suggestions are listed below.

- The participants perceived course design as being important as related to the teacher’s role in online learning. The desire to have interaction with the teacher as well as meaningful discussion boards and group projects emerged from the interviews, focus group, and artifact analysis.

- The participants understood teachers’ busy schedules and personal lives; however, there still existed a pre-conceived notion that 24 hours should not elapse without a response or grade posted. This feedback meant a great deal to their success in the online class as well as the overall satisfaction level attained from the online class.

- The participants recognized that the differences between online classes and face-to-face classes. They felt that if online classes better replicate the face-to-face experience of social interaction without the hassle of completing discussion boards, the online experience might be more satisfying. This could be done through social media or more technologically advanced methods such as synchronous classes.
Jaggars (2011) outlined very specific ways to increase teacher-student interaction including using Adobe Connect to post videos rather than written lectures, enabling software for homework such as *Mastering Chemistry* to allow students to receive immediate feedback regarding their performance, becoming more interactive in discussion boards, and finally, engaging in live chat sessions to allow students to ask questions and receive immediate responses. The conclusions found in this study may help to establish the importance of the teacher in the online classroom and subsequently, encourage the online teacher to take the approach outlined by Jaggars (2011).

Rock Valley College has designed an online course recommendation for teachers who wish to teach online. This recommendation lists a step-by-step process through which a new online teacher could ensure the quality and rigor of the online course (See Appendix F). The process includes teacher training, peer review, orientation to online teaching, course assessment, online observation, and finally, student evaluation. The following section details what each step entails in order to produce a quality online course and to comply with best practices of online teaching.

First, Rock Valley College (RVC) requires all faculty members to undergo training prior to teaching online. This includes completing a required online course through the Illinois Online Network (ION) as a means to familiarize the faculty member with online learning and experience online classes from a student’s perspective. Second, RVC requires that all online faculty members undergo a peer review process using guiding principles of (a) providing a mentor for the faculty member, (b) enhancing the online teaching experience with support (c) applying the same evaluation method used in face-to-face classes, and (d) providing a central starting point for new online teachers. To make faculty training more effective, Rock Valley
College has designed a depository of information for new online faculty to utilize and guide them.

After the peer review process, the new online teacher will proceed through an orientation that includes the following (a) computer requirements, (b) Canvas training including drop box, discussion forums, grading and email explanations, (c) RVC resource section, and finally, (d) how to set-up a course in Canvas. Next, the online teacher undergoes a course assessment similar to new face-to-face courses in which the course must be presented to the Curriculum Review Committee for approval in accordance with both the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB) and Higher Learning Commission (HLC) standards.

The observation portion of the online course development process is the most lengthy and involved. The online teacher evaluation sheet designed by RVC includes mandated factors that must be included in the online course. These factors include the written establishment of how the student will be assessed such as assignments, test, and papers. A clear and organized syllabus should also be provided to the online student. Other factors that should be included are guidelines for teacher feedback with response times listed as well as peer feedback opportunities. It is critical that the online classroom is a clear and organized online classroom with clearly marked syllabus and due dates. This happens after the online teacher has designed their online course and is now ready to undergo being evaluated by the Rock Valley College Distance Learning Committee. The guidelines for this process included the following principles.

- Assure that the course meets institution-wide standards of consistent quality and includes a coherent framework for students who take it online and face-to-face.
• Assure that there is appropriate interaction between the student and the teacher as well as student-to-student interaction.

-Questions to be answered in this section include the following questions. What provision did the instructor design to include interaction in the online course? Is this detailed in the syllabus? Is the instructor response time detailed in the syllabus? Is the time appropriate for revisions and feedback? What technology is used to encourage interaction between students and the instructor? What assignments are used to encourage interaction?

• What is the overall evaluation process for this course/program study/major that would appropriately apply to this online course? In other words, if the program study of computer science is currently undergoing institution evaluation, the new online course would undergo that evaluation as well as the distance learning evaluation.

The evaluation process mandated by RVC provides the online teacher, and their new online course, the opportunity to correct and improve the online course offering to meet best practice standards. The new online course teacher must provide a completed peer mentoring rubric to be completed by the mentor and the new online teacher. A course master syllabus, an instructor course syllabus and an ION letter of certificate stating that they have completed the mandated ION course are also required. The teacher who wishes to teach online must then present their course to the Distance Learning Committee for approval. This can be done face-to-face or online. Once this process has been completed once, the online teacher can teach other online courses without having to repeat the process.
Rock Valley College also encourages new online teacher to follow a course organization chart with suggestions for a successful and effective online course. This list includes such items as organization, orientation activities, folder for general class information, rubrics, discussions, and finally, an area for questions and answers regarding the course. Each of these areas had sub-categories of suggestions as to what to include. The following is a list of possible items for the online teacher to include in the design of an online class.

- The teacher should include welcome messages, class objectives and goals, weekly schedule, where to find information and discussion forums, and lastly, an explanation of a drop box.
- The teacher should have assignments, such as an introductory activity, to encourage collaboration and interest in the class can be used in the class.
- The teacher should have folders for all of the general class information such as the syllabus, due dates, assignment descriptions and question and answer folders.
- The teacher should have either a formal rubric or an explanation of the requirements for the assignment posted for the student. The explanations should be clear with uncomplicated grading requirements so the student is not confused as to how they are being evaluated.
- The teacher should include online discussions in the online class. The instructor should include essays that answer questions from the book or questions posed by the instructor. A response to another student is encouraged.
The teacher should use a question and answer discussion forum for students to post questions to other students as well as the instructor. The questions could be about the class or about an assignment or simply to chat about the class.

The final step in the approval process is the student evaluation. While this area is in need of improvement, RVC attempts to solicit student perceptions of their online learning experiences.

Student evaluations have proven to be beneficial to the assurance of quality and success of an online course (Harrington & Reasons, 2005). RVC chose to use the formative and summative questions form this research to allow the online student to evaluate the online teacher as well as the online course.

Formative Questions

1. I found course objectives and assignments to be clearly stated and easily understood.

2. I felt connected to the instructor and other students in this course.

3. The instructor used a number of teaching techniques to involve me in learning.

4. The way in which this course was taught required me to think in new and different ways.

5. The instructor was able to clearly explain the relationships among the various course topics.

6. The instructor makes difficult course material understandable.

7. Parts of this course were designed to make difficult material thoroughly understandable.

Summative Questions

1. In this course, the instructor's teaching required me to do my best work.
2. In this course, the instructor is able to explain difficult materials in ways that I can understand.

3. In this course, the assignments given in class were challenging.

4. This instructor is one of the best I've had at this college.

5. Of all the courses I've taken at this college, this course if one of the best I've had.

The best practices and guidelines established by Rock Valley College are cohesive with what the research says and appear to be a good start to effective online instruction. The lack of specific teacher evaluation is lacking as is the need to solicit student feedback in relation to satisfaction of an online course. Furthermore, the inclusion of discussion boards and group assignments suggests that there still exists a mentality that these activities must be included to have an effective online course, which this study has proven otherwise. There are limitations to the student evaluation portion of the online course approval process, specifically, the questionnaire. RVC is currently working to improve the student evaluation questionnaire to match the rigor and focus of both the peer review process and the observation process. As the questions suggest, this evaluation is not specific to online classes but rather ask very general questions such as “Is this your favorite class?” RVC recognizes that these questions should reflect the required elements of an online course that can be measured such as the timeliness of the teacher’s response to student’s inquiries. Additionally, the students are not required to complete the evaluation resulting in very few responses.

This study and its recommendations will be beneficial to any institution of higher education that is currently offering online classes. In particular, community colleges, which have shown the most growth in online enrollment, would greatly benefit from the findings in this study in order to increase retention and completion rates as a result of higher student
satisfaction in online learning. Furthermore, the study will eventually benefit the community college student who enrolls in an online class as the intent is to meet the needs of the online student by analyzing their experiences and adapting those needs to future online classes.

Suggestions for Future Research

There exists a lack of research investigating the student’s perception of online learning, particularly, qualitative research. Furthermore, there are very few research studies that investigate online student satisfaction and the factors that relate to successful online classes using utilizing the student’s voice and experiences. The areas in need of most research are student-teacher relationship as well as the importance of teacher interaction and response timeliness. The limitations of this study include the fact that there were only 19 participants from one community college and only one focus group.

This study provides a basis from which research could study other relevant factors related to student satisfaction with online learning such as how student success in an online course is directly related to other components of interaction, specifically related to the community of inquiry theory. This study approached the research from a general understanding of the types of interactions and the students’ perception of them. Further research could provide an in-depth approach to each interaction and the factors that contribute to the correlating presence.

There has been a community of inquiry survey instrument that has been developed to quantitatively measure the effectiveness and importance of interaction and presence in online classes. This survey instrument does not address the need for additional qualitative research in this area to capture the online student’s voice in relation to their online learning experience.
According to *Grade level: Tracking online education in the United States*, written by Allen and Seaman (2015), there was a growth in distance learning 2013 compared to 2012 enrollments but it was uneven in that, specific types of higher education institutions saw an enrollment increase and some saw an enrollment decrease.

Public institutions recorded a growth of 4.6% while private, not-for-profit institutions recorded a growth rate of 12.6%. Private-for-profit institutions actually experienced a loss of enrollment by 7.9% and lost approximately 63,000 online students. Public 2-year community colleges saw the greatest increase in students gaining approximately 40,000 students online from 2012 to 2013 (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Because of the steady growth, particularly in community colleges, the need for future research is significant. Some ideas for future research include two items which are (a) student-content interaction analysis, (b) online teacher training and education to give online teachers the tools to increase teacher-student interaction, and (c) to respond in a timely manner to student’s needs and questions.

First, a more in-depth analysis of the student-content interaction is needed. This would be comprised of expanding the student-content interaction or social presence component of the community of inquiry theory to include an analysis of the online classes who are currently using social media and other technological forums to encourage interaction in the online classroom. By paying attention to the technological preferences of this generation, course design may take on a completely different approach in regards to collaboration and discussion boards. The findings in this study reflected a negative experience of student-to-student interaction and, since this is a common design approach of online teachers, future research could determine its validity and necessity in the online class. Shaw (2014) reiterated the importance of the student-teacher relationship when they stated the “quality of faculty is a
factor related to student retention...highly qualified and satisfied faculty can influence the attrition rates of online students” (p. 8).

Second, the importance of student-teacher interaction emerged as being the most important aspect of an online course as related to satisfaction levels of community college students. Because of this importance and critical role the teacher plays in an online class, training and education is imperative. More research should gather evidence concerning specifically student satisfaction with online teachers and better teacher evaluations to be administered to online students concerning this topic (Pagliari et al., 2009). The findings in this study emphasize the need for further research into the community of inquiry model and student-content interaction as well as a comprehensive training and education program for online teachers.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to investigate community college students’ perspectives on online courses through a qualitative examination of their experiences of online learning with the implication that this would improve future online courses. The goal was to better understand online learning from a student’s viewpoint with the implication being to better design online courses in an attempt to increase student participation and satisfaction in the online learning environment. With online learning increasing across the country, the paramount issue becomes accepting the notion that online learning is not going away. By doing so, this would not only increase the need to better understand the effective methods of class design but also to implement best practices for online learning. The conclusions drawn from this study included (a) the desire to have flexibility on their academic schedule, (b) a preference
to take face-to-face classes over online classes, and finally, (c) the importance of student-teacher interaction as an indicator of student satisfaction in an online course. By utilizing these three conclusions that were drawn from the analysis of the participants’ shared experiences of online learning, online teachers can design their online courses to appropriately reflect the needs and requests of the online student.


Phelan, L. (2012). Interrogating students’ perceptions of their online learning experiences with Brookfield’s critical incident questionnaire. *Distance Education, 33*(1), 31-44.


Sheridan, K., & Kelly, M. A. (2010). The indicators of instructor presence that are important to students in online courses. MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 6(4), 767-779.


Ural, O. (2007). Attitudes of graduate students toward distance education, educational technologies and independent learning. Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 8(4), 34-42.


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. What is your experience with online courses? How many have you taken? Have they all been at the same institution? What types of courses were they? Can you elaborate on any differences you saw between the different courses (if they have taken more than one)?

2. How did you arrive at the decision to participate in an online course? Were there any factors that discouraged you from taking an online course? Tell me about that process.

3. After you completed your first online course, describe your feelings about online learning? Was your experience positive or negative?

4. Explain the difference you noticed between online course and face-to-face courses.

5. In terms of the outcome of the course, explain to me your feelings of satisfaction with the course. (If more than one has been taken, tell me about your experience with each course). Were you generally satisfied with your experience? Explain.

6. Is there anything you would have changed in the online course(s) in terms of interaction with other students? Did you feel interacting with other students was important to your learning? Why or why not?

7. Is there anything you would you have changed in the online course(s) in terms of interaction with your instructor? What resources would have been helpful in your learning? Resources can include more feedback, timely feedback, more handouts/posted lectures, grade explanation, assignment explanation.

8. Is there anything you would you have changed in the online course in terms of interaction with the content? How do you feel about the assignments given? Did the content resonate with you and your learning? In what ways? Tell me if the content interested you.
9. Overall, in terms of interacting with your instructor, other students and the content of the course, explain to me the importance and relevance of each one in online learning.

10. Overall, when considering your experience with online learning, what has contributed to online learning satisfaction?
APPENDIX B

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN AN INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW
Consent to Participate in an Individual Interview as Part of a Study exploring Rock Valley College Student Experience with Online Courses and Learning

The purpose of this interview is to explore the experiences of students at Rock Valley College who have taken online courses. In an effort to discover the nature of student satisfaction, questions regarding what type of online class were taken, overall experience with that course, suggestions for improving online courses as well as experience with teacher interaction, group collaboration and content relevancy. I consent to take part in this interview with Miki Bacino Thiessen, a faculty member at Rock Valley College and the researcher for this project, to share my experiences and opinions about online courses and online learning at Rock Valley College, including ways to improve the online experience for future students. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to leave the interview at any time. If I decide not to participate at any time during the interview without penalty or prejudice, my decision will not affect the services I receive at Rock Valley College and will not be shared with anyone outside the room. None of my thoughts, experiences, opinions or comments will be shared with anyone outside this room unless all identifying information is removed first. The information I provide will be grouped with answers from other people as well as other individual interviews so I cannot be identified.

Please Print Your Name

Please Sign Your Name

Witness Signature       Date
APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT/QUESTIONS
Introduction by facilitator:

Hello, my name is Miki Bacino Thiessen and I teach online classes here at Rock Valley College. I am conducting a study to explore community college student’s experience with online learning. Thank you for taking part in this study as it will give insight to online courses here at Rock Valley College. This focus group should take about an hour to an hour and a half. You have already been interviewed individually and have expressed interest in participating in further research by joining this focus group. All topics covered in this focus group will relate to my research on community college students and their experiences with online learning.

During this focus group, I will ask questions and facilitate the group discussion. I am not here to offer my opinions or insight but rather to record your shred experiences with online courses here at the college. The session will be videotaped so that I can make sure I catch all of the information shared.

You were invited to this session because you participated in individual interviews and I felt you might have more to contribute. Please do not feel as if you have to match your answers from the individual interview. If you feel that another participant has offered another insight and you want to contribute to that comment, feel free to do so. Just as you did for the interviews, you will need to sign a release form stating that you know what this focus group is about. The comments and your names will remain confidential and your name will not be attached to any of the comments you make and will not leave this room. I ask that you not share any of your comments and especially any of other people’s comments with anyone outside of this room. I also ask that we are all respectful of each other and allow everyone to participate and have a chance to offer their insight. You may talk to each other as well. Please keep in mind that I am
only interested in your thoughts and opinions, there are no right or wrong answers and I will not share any of your comments with any teachers or administrators here at Rock Valley College. There are bound to be various answers and perceptions of online learning here at the college, however, this is not a conflict resolution meeting there should not be any personal attacks on one another nor should you question why a participant feels a certain way about online learning. I wish to encourage group participation so that if someone mentions something that you feel you would like to add, please feel free to jump into the conversation.

Can I answer any questions that you might have before we begin?

Focus Group Questions:

1. I would like to go around the room and ask each of you to introduce yourself and give a brief background as to your experience with online learning and Rock Valley College. For example, how long have you attended RVC? How many classes have you taken online? Have they all been through RVC? What classes were they? How far are you in your degree?

2. Probe: Will you transfer to another college after RVC? If so, which one?

3. Probe: What was a factor in deciding to take an online course?

4. Now let’s go around the room and share our overall experience with online classes at Rock Valley College, specifically. Have your experiences been positive, negative, a mixture of both?

5. Probe: Can you give examples of the positive experiences? Negative?

6. Probe: If negative…Can you identify an area that, if handled differently, would have made your experience a positive one? How did you handle the situation when this happened?
7. Probe: OR…if positive, what aspect of the course did you find most satisfying? Did anyone else experience this (positive/negative) aspect in their online course?

8. Probe: If a friend were to ask you about the online classes at Rock Valley College, what would you say? Would you recommend that they take one? Please elaborate…

9. Probe: What do you mean when you say…..

10. What differences have you noticed when you compare the various online courses that you’ve taken here at Rock Valley College? Please elaborate.

11. Probe: Can anyone else elaborate or further this answer?

12. Probe: What do you think is the reason for these differences?

13. Now imagine that you are part of a task group that is assigned to improve the online courses and online learning here at Rock Valley College.

   a. What would you recommend to improve in regards to online courses or online learning at RVC? How would you recommend that the college implement your idea?

   b. What are some innovative ideas that you would want to share with the task group in regards to improving online courses or online learning at RVC? Can you elaborate?

   c. Is there a specific item that you would want to see standardized, meaning that every teacher would have to do/design or implement into their online course?

   d. What additional resources would you want to see available to online students? Some examples of a resource could be mandatory orientation sessions, the Student Services department help in participating in online courses, links to websites that could be helpful.
e. Is there an area during the online course that you felt you struggled that you would want to change so that other students do not struggle in the same way?

14. In terms of satisfaction, explain what factors contributed to your satisfaction with online learning.

15. Probe: What caused you to be dis-satisfied?

16. Probe: Did anyone else experience these same factors?

17. Probe: How do you feel about online courses, in general?

18. There are three areas that can be altered or changed in regards to the design of an online course. The first is the content of the course, the second is the teacher interaction and the last is the interaction with other students. Can you comment on what you found to be satisfactory and what could be transformed to allow for greater satisfaction and success for future online students?

   a. Content of the course?
   b. Teacher interaction/feedback?
   c. Interaction with other students?

19. Probe: Can you give specific examples of how the content of the course altered your impression of the course. In what way was the content of the course relevant to you?

20. Probe: Can you give specific examples of what type of feedback you are expecting from your online teacher? Does timeliness hold importance to you? Did you receive the amount of feedback you were looking for?

21. Is there anything else that we have not discussed or that you would like to go back to or add more comments?
APPENDIX D

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN FOCUS GROUP
Consent to Participate in Focus Group Study as Part of a Study exploring Rock Valley College Student Experience with Online Courses and Learning

The purpose of this group discussion is to explore the shared experiences of students at Rock Valley College who have taken online courses. In an effort to discover the nature of student satisfaction, questions regarding what type of online class were taken, overall experience with that course, suggestions for improving online courses as well as experience with teacher interaction, group collaboration and content relevancy. I consent to take part in this focus group with Miki Bacino Thiessen, a faculty member at Rock Valley College and the researcher for this project, to share my experiences and opinions about online courses and online learning at Rock Valley College, including ways to improve the online experience for future students. My participation is voluntary and I understand that I am free to leave the group at any time without penalty or prejudice. If I decide not to participate at any time during the focus group discussion, my decision will not affect the services I receive at Rock Valley College and will not be shared with anyone outside the room. None of my thoughts, experiences, opinions or comments will be shared with anyone outside this room unless all identifying information is removed first. The information I provide will be grouped with answers from other people as well as other focus groups so I cannot be identified.

Please Print Your Name

Please Sign Your Name

Witness Signature Date
APPENDIX E

DESCRIPTION OF ONLINE COURSE OFFERED AT ROCK VALLEY COLLEGE
ECO111 - Principles of Economics: Micro (3 credits)
This course is an introduction to product and resource pricing under various market conditions, and public policy alternatives for economic efficiency and equity in the marketplace.

ENG 101 - Composition I (3 credits)

In Composition I, students employ flexible strategies to develop focused, purposeful essays that demonstrate college-level thinking. Students write in a variety of textual forms, including persuasive essays in the latter half of the semester, and learn to address the needs of audiences by increasing their awareness of the rhetorical situations in which they write. Students learn to develop and support their claims effectively, to position their ideas in relation to those of others, and to edit their writing carefully. Students write 16-24 pages of revised prose during the course.

ENG 103 - Composition II (3 credits)

In Composition II, the second half of a two-semester writing sequence, students conduct research on academic topics, advance extended arguments, and use sources appropriately and effectively. In doing so, they develop the habits of mind associated with sound scholarship. Students write 16-24 pages of revised prose during the course, including documented multi-source writing in one or more papers for a combined total of at least 2500 words in final version.

MTH 115 - General Education Mathematics (3 credits)

General Education Mathematics focuses on mathematical reasoning and the solving of real-life problems, rather than on routine skills and appreciation. Three or four topics are studied in depth, with at least 3 chosen from the following list: geometry, counting techniques and probability, graph theory, logic/set theory, mathematics of finance, and statistics. The use of calculators and computers is strongly encouraged.

PSY 160 - American National Government (3 credits)

American National Government is an introduction to the national government, including its structure, powers, and relationship to the American people. Topics include the legislative, executive, and judicial branches, civil rights and civil liberties, political parties and interest groups. Current events are emphasized throughout the course.

PSY 170 - General Psychology (3 credits)

General Psychology is an introduction to the entire area of psychology through a presentation of historical and current theory and research. Topics include research methods, biology of behavior, sensation and perception, learning, memory, development, motivation, personality, and social and abnormal behavior.

SOC 190 - Introduction to Sociology (3 credits)

Introduction to Sociology includes a scientific study of the major concepts and principles of social behavior. Using core sociological theories, this course focuses on the patterns of social
group interactions, institutions and structures and the relationship between these elements of society.

**SPH 131 - Fundamentals of Communication (3 credits)**

Fundamentals of Communication is a beginning course in the theory and practice of speech communication. Attention is given to listening, interpersonal and group communication, public speaking. Students will develop more confidence and skill in oral communication.

**SPH 202 - Intercultural Communication (3 credits)**

Intercultural Communication is a study of communication among people who have different cultural backgrounds. The course will focus on the impact of verbal and nonverbal communications, belief systems, use of power, masculine and feminine roles, and language on intercultural communication. Students will develop communication skills to overcome intercultural barriers.
APPENDIX F

DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE APPROVAL PROCESS
ROCK VALLEY COLLEGE DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE APPROVAL PROCESS

RVC strives for academic quality in all its courses, regardless of delivery method. To ensure quality in online courses, the RVC Distance Learning Committee (DLC) has established the following procedure. The guiding principles of this procedure include:

- Process should serve a mentoring role for faculty teaching in an online environment
- Process should enhance online teaching and learning with voluntary support
- Process should evaluate by the same means as face-to-face courses
- Process should provide a central starting point for those new to online learning

1. All new online instructors must take “Online Learning: An Overview” offered through ION prior to teaching online. A course description can be found at the link below: [http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/courses/catalog/C-CourseDetail.asp?course=1](http://www.ion.uillinois.edu/courses/catalog/C-CourseDetail.asp?course=1)

   When you register for the course, select Rock Valley College as your institution and include member code **BW775**. Because RVC is a founding member of ION, you will receive the lowest tuition rate for the course.

   A graduate-level course in distance learning will serve as a substitute for the ION course.

2. The Division Dean will contact the Dean of Academic Development and Instructional Support (ADIS) or the RVC Instructional Designer to obtain a **Peer Mentoring Rubric**. Alternatively, the instructor can obtain the Peer Mentoring Rubric from the RVC Faculty Group on EAGLE.

3. The Peer Mentoring Rubric serves as a guide for online instructors. As you build your online course, please be sure the course addresses all items in the rubric. You may contact RVC’s Instructional Designer for assistance with your online course preparation. You can develop the course in your Sandbox on EAGLE.

4. When you are ready to present your course to the DLC, contact the Distance Learning Committee (via the Dean of ADIS) to schedule a presentation.

5. At least one week prior to the presentation, submit the following to your Division Dean:
   a. Peer Mentoring Rubric (with a completed header)
   b. Course Master Syllabus
   c. Instructor course syllabus
d. ION letter/certificate of completion (or equivalent)

6. The Division Dean will forward the documents to the Distance Learning Committee via the Dean of Academic Development and Instructional Support (ADIS).

7. The instructor will present the course as scheduled. The Division Dean is required to attend the presentation. During this presentation, the DL Committee will complete a checklist of online elements present in successful online courses. Note: Instructors have the option to make their online course available for online review by members of the DL committee in lieu of a face-to-face presentation.

8. In the event that the course has not met the criteria, the DL committee will send a letter to the Division Dean with a copy to the instructor explaining what improvements need to be implemented. The instructor will work with a mentor to correct the issues noted and repeat the presentation process.

9. When the instructor has successfully completed the requirements, the completed Peer Mentoring Rubric will be signed by the Dean of ADIS and the Division Dean. Copies of the instructor’s packet will be given to the Division Dean as well as to the Curriculum Coordinator. In addition, the instructor will receive a letter of completion.

10. Once an instructor has successfully gone through the presentation process, he/she will no longer be required to present future courses to the Distance Learning Committee. Future online course review to ensure quality, clarity and consistency will be the responsibility of the Division Dean and Dean of ADIS.