

A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE NONTRADITIONAL ADULT LEARNERS'
PERCEPTIONS OF HYBRID CLASSES

by

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A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in the
Department of Education Leadership,
Policy, and Technology Studies
in the Graduate School at
The University of Alabama

TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA

2017

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ABSTRACT

Nontraditional adult students in higher education must balance a multitude of responsibilities while completing their college education. This student population juggles work, family, and college coursework. To maximize options for this student population and meet their needs, institutions of higher education have developed alternative modes of instruction, such as hybrid classes, which use both face-to-face instruction and online instruction. Delivering alternative options for instruction provides the convenience and flexibility that adult students need. However, it requires educators to design courses and create a campus climate that promotes student engagement. Research supports the theory of student engagement as a predictor of student success and degree completion; thus, the hybrid format is intended to facilitate a greater degree of engagement.

This case study explored undergraduate nontraditional adult learners' perceptions of hybrid classes and student engagement in this alternative format. This study drew upon the research literature bases of adult learners, nontraditional students, student engagement, online and hybrid course design, and social presence.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Jay, who has been my support throughout this doctoral process. His love, prayers, and encouragement have provided me with the strength to persevere and fulfill my dream.

To Blaze, our faithful four-legged family member, who spent countless hours sitting next to me as I conducted research and wrote this dissertation.

To my parents, Lawrence and Barbara, my son, Joshua, and all of my extended family who have prayed for me and believed in me.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have learned a great deal through this doctoral program. The people in my life played an integral role in helping me to achieve this goal. I would like to acknowledge my appreciation for the contributions of my doctoral committee chair, Dr. Claire Major, and the committee members, Dr. Nathaniel Bray, Dr. William Bryan, Dr. Katie Busby, and Dr. Karri Holley. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Dr. Arleene Breaux for her advisement and encouragement throughout this process. I am especially grateful to Rose Mary Foncree and Dr. Matthew Fifolt for their expertise and assistance. A very special thanks to all of the students I have been blessed to know and work with throughout my career. You, the students, have taught me about striving for excellence and serving others. Lastly, I give thanks to my Heavenly Father for the many blessings and answered prayers.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

With the increase in the undergraduate nontraditional adult student population in colleges and universities in the United States, there has been an increase in enrollment for online and e-learning instruction. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2014 over 40% of college students were 25 years of age and older. Nationally over one-third of all undergraduate students were taking at least one online course (NCES, 2016). Simultaneously, institutions of higher education have been pursuing a shift in instructional approaches in order to attract and retain the adult student population. Adult students are interested in the convenience and flexibility provided by online learning; however, not all adult students are comfortable with online courses (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). For example, there is a growing interest among nontraditional students, particularly adult learners, in online classes and blended learning because these formats provide the flexibility that working adult students need (Wyatt, 2011).

Online education, now recognized as one of the fastest growing segments of higher education (Chen, Gonyea, & Kuh, 2008), encompasses several types of delivery methods, including blended learning and hybrid courses. Initially introduced as distance learning with access to videos and classes programmed through television networks, online learning has evolved into innovative course content and delivery (Adam & Nel, 2009). Courses can be offered in real-time as synchronous offerings or at the convenience of students as asynchronous. Online courses can be delivered solely online or in a blended format, known as hybrid courses, with

some instruction provided online while other portions of the course are offered face-to-face. As suggested by Ausburn (2004), hybrid courses are thought to provide the best of both worlds by creating an ideal learning structure which joins the flexibility of online courses with the personal interaction of face-to-face courses.

The promise and peril of online instruction has led college and university administrators to use “blended” or “hybrid” approaches of face-to-face instructional time and online instruction. However, based on the literature review, there is little information about nontraditional student perceptions regarding blended learning and whether this delivery mode is meeting their needs in terms of learning and academic engagement (Kasworm, 2010).

This chapter provides an overview of the history of adult education in the United States, a summary of the challenges facing nontraditional adult learners with online and blended learning, and an explanation of the value of student engagement. Understanding the learning experiences of this nontraditional student population group in terms of e-learning and student engagement will provide beneficial information for improvements in course design and learning. The purpose of this research was to explore the experiences and perceptions of engagement by adult nontraditional learners in hybrid classes.

Background

Technology is rapidly changing the ways we learn and do business in the global market (Waha & Davis, 2014). In higher education, the number of undergraduate adult students has continued to grow due to an emphasis on continuing education in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Due to this increase in undergraduate nontraditional adult students, online and e-learning instruction has emerged. In fact, approximately 30% of all undergraduate students in the United States now take at least one online course (Compton, 2006; NCES, 2016; Platt, Raile, &

Yu, 2014). Thus, online education has provided an avenue of access for many students, especially the adult learner population (Platt et al., 2014; Wyatt, 2011). In light of this increased interest in online learning options, institutions of higher education need to understand the perceptions of undergraduate adult nontraditional students regarding e-learning in order to attract and retain them.

History of Adult Learners and Distance Education

Understanding the history of adult learners and their place in higher education is essential to understanding this study. Likewise, it is important to understand how and why technology transformed education. It is also of significance to recognize how adult learners perceive the use of technology in their educational experiences. Historically, the technologies available to adult students provided the means for them to continue either formal education or vocational training. Therefore, it is necessary to understand that *both* the nontraditional adult student population and the use of technology influence higher education practices.

During the American War of Independence, many colleges suspended operations or reduced operations due to a lack of resources. After the war, there was an emphasis on citizenry and scholarly development obtained through higher education. Access to higher education, however, was primarily restricted to White males (Thelin, 2011). It was not until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that higher education in America experienced an increase in the numbers of institutions and student enrollments. As an agrarian society, some adults worked to support their families before taking time to attend college. It was during this period that institutions reinvented themselves through curricular innovation and access to education for previously excluded groups, particularly for women. Improvements to college access and curriculum options appealed to adults, and adult students typically made decisions to

attend college based on economic reasons or for the purpose of enrichment. Furthermore, adult students were more inclined to attend evening classes and take correspondence courses (Thelin, 2011).

Another surge in enrollment and access occurred after World War II with the availability of funds through the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly referred to as the GI Bill. Colleges and universities received an overwhelming number of enrollees—men returning from the war to use their benefits and women who had stabilized the workforce with a new desire to improve their skills and education. During the 1950s, models of adult education were developed to reflect a more cohesive approach to education focused on self-directed learning and life experiences (Chen, 2014).

Prior to the 1950s, adult students had the opportunity to further their education through distance learning via correspondence courses (Major, 2015). Beginning in the 1920s, one of the first methods of distance education was radio. During the 1950s, television provided a technological venue, and in the 1980s computer technologies transformed distance education (Major, 2015). Institutions of higher learning experienced qualitative changes as they restructured their programs to meet the growing demands of adult students, demands that were culturally different from those of traditional-aged students (Thelin, 2011). With the American economy and marketplace moving from an agrarian to an industrial and technological society (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999), higher education continues to find new and innovative approaches to reach the nontraditional adult student population.

As demonstrated in the research literature adults primarily attend college based on economics and the marketplace as well as an intrinsic desire for self-improvement (Chen, 2014; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Merriam, 2001). However, adult students continue to struggle with

balancing education and work and family obligations. Hence, educational options that provide convenience and flexibility appeal to adult learners. Institutions of higher education have evolved over time to accommodate the needs of students, particularly the needs of nontraditional adult students. Therefore, I will review the literature regarding this population of students and issues surrounding their academic success.

Nontraditional Adult Students

The term “nontraditional” undergraduate student is the term commonly used to refer to adult students. Nontraditional adult undergraduate students are defined as those who are 25 years of age and older (NCES, 2016) and have at least one of the following characteristics: employed, have a family, attend college part-time, and often, first generation (Chen, 2014; Compton et al., 2006; Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011).

Adult students encounter unique circumstances and challenges when they return to college to pursue educational goals (Ausburn, 2004; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). For example, adult students frequently juggle their full-time work and family responsibilities while also attending classes, which is something traditional students do not usually experience. Therefore, the flexibility and convenience associated with online courses appeal to adult students (Essary, 2014; Wyatt, 2011; Young & Norgard, 2006). Yoo and Huang (2013) found that female nontraditional students were more likely to finish online courses as compared to their counterparts who took onsite classes. The researchers concluded that the difference in completion rates was likely due to the accessibility that e-learning provided while these students attended to their work and family obligations.

One of the foundations of adult learning theory is that adult students want their life experiences to be recognized and used in the learning process (Knowles, 1980). Knowles

explored the importance of studying and understanding the learning needs of adult students to reinforce the necessity of adult-centric approaches to support their academic engagement and success. This approach to teaching adult learners is known as andragogy. The theory of andragogy suggests that adult students learn differently from traditional-aged students because adults use life experiences to assimilate new information, enjoy collaborative learning with peers, and view the instructor as a facilitator (Knowles, 1978; Merriam, 2001).

According to Vaughan (2009), the theory of andragogy supports blended, or hybrid, learning because collaborative learning is an element of blended learning and collaborative methods of instruction often appeal to adult learners. According to Sogunro (2014), adult students identified quality of instruction and interactive classrooms as engaging and highly motivating factors for course completion and success. Adult nontraditional learners begin their college education (or return to it) with ambitious goals of obtaining a college degree while maintaining their adult responsibilities with family and work. Therefore, the challenges of returning to college for nontraditional students while balancing job and family responsibilities may be better facilitated by e-learning options such as hybrid courses (Ausburn, 2004).

In summary, nontraditional adult learners are a growing population of students in higher education. Educators who understand the factors that contribute to adult student success will make better decisions regarding course design and delivery for this population of students. As described in adult learning theory, adult learners like to discuss what they know about issues, and they tend to connect their experiences to course content. Factors associated with successful degree completion by adult learners include persistence and student engagement (Wyatt, 2011). Successful degree completion by nontraditional adult students also includes factors associated with motivation. Adult learning theory suggests that adult learners are intrinsically motivated to

learn for reasons such as self-improvement and self-esteem (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001) and extrinsic factors such as career advancement and job security (Kasworm, 2008).

For adult learners, the pathway to academic success includes the prospect of engagement through interaction with other students and faculty and the opportunity to assimilate new knowledge with life experiences. These types of learning experiences align with Tinto's (2006) theory of student persistence, and while Tinto's work focused on traditional students, it demonstrates the value of student engagement for student success. The following sections provide background information about blended or hybrid learning and the important roles of teaching presence and student engagement when using this form of online instruction.

Blended Learning

The term "blended learning" has multiple meanings, but the most common meaning refers to mixed forms of learning, such as online learning and face-to-face learning (Allen et al., 2007; Oliver & Trigwell, 2005). Similarly, "hybrid courses" are courses designed to use online discussions coupled with numerous face-to-face meetings (Arispe & Blake, 2012).

Deschacht and Goeman (2015) suggested that the benefits of blended learning using the hybrid class format may provide an optimal option for adult students because it provides convenience and accessibility as well as the opportunity for face-to-face interactions to promote engagement. The terms blended learning and hybrid classes are often used synonymously to designate the same type of classes. According to Oliver and Trigwell (2005), blended learning is a term better suited to corporate training rather than education. In its place, the authors suggested using another term that captures the essence of the teaching or instructional pedagogy, such as

‘blended pedagogics or blended teaching.’ For the purpose of this study, the terms hybrid classes, hybrid learning, or hybrid teaching will be used.

Online instruction and teaching presence. Teaching presence requires the instructor to create and implement activities that foster interactions between students and teachers. The term “teaching presence” has been identified as one of the elements associated with the theoretical model of community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Creating a teaching presence reduces the likelihood that students will feel disconnected from one another and the instructor. The community of inquiry model uses three elements to form a complete educational experience for students in online education: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Preisman, 2014).

Social presence is related to the connectedness that students experience in their learning environment (Whiteside, 2015). For adult students, having this social presence is important because adults want to relate to the instructor and peers as “adults” both physically and psychologically and feel a sense of mutual respect based on their experiences (Knowles, 1980). This type of connectedness helps students develop supportive relationships in the learning environment.

Teaching presence is a major component of the online learning environment, as the role of the instructor is perceived differently from that of the traditional classroom learning environment. Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2012) demonstrated the value of teaching presence when designing the online component of academic courses. According to Mupinga et al. (2012), students in online learning classes rated communication and interaction as their greatest expectations. Major (2015) described communication as “the process by which we assign and convey meaning in an attempt to create shared understanding” (p. 179).

With the widespread use of the Internet, communication is multimodal and allows for quicker access to information. Greater access and quicker response time supports research findings by Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, and Pelz (2000). According to the authors, students identified student-instructor interaction as a top priority (Swan et al., 2000). Additionally, students expressed greater satisfaction with online instruction when there was consistent and frequent interaction between students and instructors and high levels of activity within the class (Swan et al., 2000). Developing a teaching presence through the community of inquiry model may enhance student online course experiences and expectations related to communication and interaction.

Both teaching presence and social presence are aspects of engagement that online and blended learning must address due to the unique challenges of instructional delivery (Kahu, 2013; Whiteside, 2015). Sogunro (2014) recommended designing online courses to create a strong teaching presence in order to facilitate student engagement. To enhance social and teaching presence for online and hybrid courses, further exploration with multimodalities is needed (Whiteside, 2015). Improving adult completion and graduation rates will require treating adult learners as individuals; therefore, a “one size fits all” model of learning cannot adequately address the needs of adult learners.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is an increasingly more popular term in higher education; however, many still question the level of student engagement possible in online courses (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011; Kahu, 2013; Kreber & Kanuka, 2006). Major (2015) described student engagement as a “student’s willingness and desire to participate and be successful in a learning process that leads them to higher-level thinking and long-term understanding” (p. 208). Student

engagement, a key factor in student success, is associated with student learning and persistence and applies to adult students in online and face-to-face courses (Kahu, 2013; Kuh, 2009; Tinto, 2006). To better understand the concept of student success, Kuh (2009) and Tinto (2006) revealed that the more engaged a student is, the greater the likelihood of strong academic performance and retention. Thus, a need exists to explore how adult learners perceive their student engagement experiences with regard to their courses and programs of study.

Due to changing student demographics and the emergence of e-learning options, institutions must explore innovative strategies to facilitate student engagement for adult nontraditional students. As previously noted, the challenge of engagement for adult students is related to the numerous priorities and responsibilities that require their time and attention. Wyatt's (2011) research with nontraditional student engagement supports the importance of student interaction with faculty to promote student success and retention.

According to Astin (1993) and Kuh (2001), students who are engaged and involved through faculty interaction, participate in campus activities, and communicate with other students, tend to have greater academic outcomes. While these areas of student engagement are often associated with the needs of traditional students, it is not uncommon for nontraditional adult students to also desire faculty and peer interactions. Once college administrators determine the areas of student engagement that need attention, they can initiate efforts to improve offerings and positively affect student outcomes (Kuh, 2001).

One of the gaps observed by educators regarding adult college students is their lack of academic engagement. As described in the research literature, nontraditional students are most vulnerable to dropping out of college due to the demands of everyday life (Gilardi & Guglielmetti, 2011; Stoessel, Ihme, Barbarino, Fisseler, & Sturmer, 2014). According to

Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005), students who self-identify as part-time or nontraditional students are at greater risk for retention and degree completion than their peers due to frequent periods of absence from school. Furthermore, obstacles in higher education experienced by adult students are often different from those experienced by traditional-age students. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) conducted a qualitative study in which they interviewed adult nontraditional students regarding perceived obstacles for success in college degree completion. As a result of these interviews, the authors discovered effective factors and strategies for academic and financial aid advising, faculty interaction, and communication with other campus organizations (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014). Additionally, they noted that each of these areas was related to student engagement and student services.

Adult students have identified convenience as a factor in degree persistence because it fulfills their need to be in charge of their academic careers and personal life (Wyatt, 2011). For example, convenience for adult students frequently relates to class schedules and support services being available to fit the existing schedules of working students and parents. There is abundant evidence in the research literature to support online and hybrid class delivery as a means of meeting the needs of adult learners in terms of convenience and flexibility for degree persistence (Pontes, M., & Pontes, N., 2012; Simpson & Benson, 2013; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Additionally, the hybrid format provides opportunities to meet face-to-face with instructors and classmates which results in social engagement and convenience, both desirable attributes for adult students.

Statement of the Problem

With recent paradigm shifts in instructional delivery and the rise of the nontraditional adult learner population, there is a need to explore how adult students perceive hybrid courses as

related to their learning and as a means of improving course design and student engagement. The format, delivery, and assessment of hybrid courses are areas related to engagement and retention, especially among adult students. Nevertheless, instructors often use the same teaching methods and assessment instruments as they would for traditional face-to-face instruction. Therefore, consideration needs to be given to whether or not these instructional delivery and assessment methods are best suited to the hybrid format. Study findings may help institutional leaders develop strategies to influence the culture of engagement and immersion for nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). According to Korr, Derwin, Greene, and Sokoloff (2012), a connection exists between the use of online education resources and andragogy.

In the past, weaknesses associated with online instruction included less face-to-face time between student and instructor and miscommunication as well as the perception of a passive learning environment as compared to the competitive environment that in-class environments facilitate (Jackson & Helms, 2008). More recently, researchers demonstrated that student perceptions of online learning were more favorable because students perceived they had more control over their learning in this format as compared to traditional face-to-face learning (Euzent, Martin, Moskal, & Moskal, 2011; Jackson & Helms, 2008; Klein, Noe, & Wang, 2006).

Strengths associated with online programs continue to include self-paced learning and greater flexibility to accommodate schedules (Euzent et al., 2011; Jackson & Helms, 2008). The value of identifying factors affecting student perceptions regarding hybrid classes may help instructors and administrators design more effective curriculum, enhance technology, and broaden access to higher education for the nontraditional student population (Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2013). Additionally, institutional leaders can use this information to develop strategies

to influence the culture of engagement and immersion for the nontraditional student population (Wyatt, 2011).

In summary, research regarding nontraditional adult students and online learning has primarily focused on online experiences and learning outcomes. The likelihood of redesigning courses to meet the needs of adult students, however, is greatly diminished by the absence of adult student perceptions and experiences with hybrid courses. Obtaining an understanding of perspectives from this adult student population allows educators, administrators, and policymakers to make informed decisions regarding course design and student engagement (Platt et al., 2014).

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore adult student perceptions of their instructional experiences with hybrid courses at one private university in the Southeastern United States. Previous studies have shown an increase in student enrollment in online, blended learning, and hybrid classes (Allen et al., 2007; Klein et al., 2006; Platt et al., 2014). However, to improve course design and influence institutional decisions about blended learning, further research is needed to understand how undergraduate adult students perceive hybrid classes. Specifically, this study explored: (1) adult learner perceptions of hybrid courses/blended learning, and (2) adult learner perceptions of student engagement in hybrid courses.

Significance of the Study

For more than 30 years, nontraditional adult students represented approximately one-third to one-half of undergraduate students enrolled in higher education institutions in the United States (Compton et al., 2006; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; NCES, 2016; Wyatt, 2011). In addition

to the growth in the adult student population, there has been an increase in student enrollment in online classes and forms of e-learning (Essary, 2014; Jackson & Helms, 2008; Wyatt, 2011).

Computer-based learning, or e-learning, has had a significant impact on educational offerings and continues to grow in popularity (Baran et al., 2011; Chen et al., 2008; Kim, Song, & Luo, 2016). Hybrid classes have been designed with the intent to offer another option to students that combines the benefits of face-to-face class time with online instruction. Adult learners in online classes represent a significant population within higher education, but their success can be compromised by limited support and resources due to a lack of understanding regarding their unique experiences and needs associated with online learning and hybrid courses. A need exists to explore the perceptions of adult learners regarding their experiences with hybrid classes to improve course design and resources.

Colleges and universities recognize the importance of adult learners to the mission of the institution and their impact on enrollment numbers and financial viability. Therefore, administrators and faculty members will benefit from the findings of this study and gain insights for planning, recruiting, and enrolling students. Institutional leaders also recognize the value of student engagement to ensure student success rates. The findings of this study will benefit faculty members by helping them to design courses that better meet the needs of adult students. Adult students will benefit from the findings of this study because they will have a collective voice to represent their perceptions. Furthermore, it is anticipated that the results of this study will lead to courses that are better designed to help adult students engage more deeply in their learning experience and enable them to fulfill projected learning outcomes.

Summary

This chapter presented an overview of the history of adult learners, also known as nontraditional students, in higher education in the United States, as well as course delivery options that utilize online technology. The history of higher education in the United States has been evolving for over 200 years. It continues to evolve with the most recent data indicating that nontraditional adult students are one of the largest and fastest growing populations in higher education. In addition to this area of growth, colleges and universities have experienced an increase in the number of students taking some courses through some form of e-learning, which includes online and hybrid courses. With the benefits of online and e-learning formats, such as convenience and flexibility, adult learners may view these offerings as attractive and effective options for completing degrees.

Adult students face numerous obstacles with balancing multiple responsibilities, which can make student engagement and degree persistence a challenge. Research supports the value of student engagement as a factor for retention and student success. Educators are interested in identifying the factors associated with degree completion for adult learners. To better facilitate the expectations of adult students regarding degree completion, a need exists to explore how adult students perceive hybrid courses in terms of course design and opportunities for student interaction and engagement.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Colleges and universities in the United States have seen an increase in the population of adult student learners (Allen & Seaman, 2010; NCES, 2016). Additionally, these institutions have experienced increased enrollments in e-learning, specifically online and hybrid courses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2016), online education is one form of education that has continued to grow at an average rate of 3.7% since 2009. The majority of growth during the past 12 years has been in full-time student enrollment, but this trend is expected to shift in the future as increasingly more students attend college part-time.

Students who attend college part-time are considered to be nontraditional students; they are typically older than traditional-age students (Stoessel et al., 2015). With this trend toward online learning, a need exists to explore how adult students perceive hybrid classes as a means of addressing their needs as adult learners. Perceptions of adult students are important for institutional decision-makers when designing curriculum and class schedules.

According to Wyatt (2011), interactive learning experiences such as collegial interactions with faculty and staff are often perceived as successful engagement by adult students. However, this type of interaction and engagement can be difficult to attain through conventional online classes (Major, 2015). Students may find that distractions are greater in online classes as compared to the traditional classroom setting due to competing factors such as home and work environments. However, incorporating delivery approaches for online classes that utilize

multiple instructional characteristics can positively contribute to student engagement and learning (Euzent et al., 2011). Additionally, some online courses are conducted synchronously whereby students meet together online at the same time, thus providing a ‘real-time’ experience within the class.

According to O’Malley and McCraw (1999), students expressed a belief that they were learning as much through synchronous online courses but preferred the asynchronous format because it provided greater flexibility for their schedules. Hybrid courses offer the opportunity for face-to-face class time while also providing flexibility. Since the goal for adult learners is to successfully complete their studies, further exploration of student perceptions of hybrid courses will provide information to guide educators in the creation, implementation, and evaluation of hybrid courses.

According to Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005), students who self-identify as part-time or nontraditional students are at greater risk for attrition and degree completion because their progression is often disrupted by periods of absence from classes. Students identify accessibility as a positive feature of online instruction because it provides the desired convenience of attending classes through technology. Questions about the quality of online courses and blended learning as compared to classroom instruction have led to comparison studies. Based on learning outcomes and student evaluations researchers have concluded that academic content seems to be comparable between online and classroom instruction (Klein et al., 2006; Platt et al., 2014). Yet, the perception of adult students regarding their learning experiences, engagement opportunities, and learning outcomes has not been thoroughly explored and documented in previous research.

The articles and studies selected for this review include research of both online and hybrid classes. Previous studies regarding adult learners and e-learning focused primarily on

online learning. Research focusing on blended learning includes the following areas of study: institutional implementation of blended learning, student engagement, and comparisons of online and blended learning to classroom learning. Studies conducted to explore how institutions and administrators shape the e-learning experience report challenges related to technology, sufficient training, and course design (Porter, Graham, Spring, & Welch, 2014; Roby et al., 2013).

There are several key factors that affect perceptions of students toward online and hybrid courses: learning styles, instructor availability, technological support, and flexibility (Arispe & Blake, 2012; El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Roby et al., 2013). The purpose of these studies was to (a) identify factors and use the data to formulate institutional policies and procedures; (b) enhance the quality of the learning experience; and (c) improve perceived weaknesses (Jackson & Helms, 2008; Roby et al., 2013). Research methods included qualitative student interviews (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007; Roby et al., 2013) and quantitative surveys (Arispe & Blake, 2012; Simpson & Benson, 2013; Jackson & Helms, 2008).

Study results showed that students consistently identified the following strengths of online and hybrid courses: flexibility for continuing education while employed, time to reflect on assignments and responses, and diversity of delivery methods. Student perceptions of weaknesses related to online and hybrid courses included: technological issues, complexity of course content, and lack of interaction with the instructor (online courses only).

According to Simpson and Benson (2013), further improvements to online and hybrid courses can be made through a peer review process. El Mansour and Mupinga (2007) further noted that identifying student learning styles and matching such styles to delivery methods were keys to success. The results of these previous studies can be used to attract and retain students who seek greater access and availability as they pursue their education (Roby et al., 2013).

Several researchers reported findings on student engagement for adult and nontraditional students and the importance of increasing opportunities for student engagement (Shieh, 2010; Wyatt, 2011; Yoo & Huang, 2013). These authors identified numerous priorities and responsibilities requiring time and attention as the primary challenges of adult students. The value of student engagement was not dismissed, but it was perceived as difficult to incorporate into the education of adult learners. The task of fostering a sense of student engagement in online courses has been studied from the lenses of student interaction, social presence, teaching presence, and social development theory.

In addition to the benefit of flexibility provided by online learning, both students and educators recognized the value of online instruction in preparing individuals for lifelong learning in a technology-driven world (Adam & Nel, 2009). Graham, Woodfield, and Harrison (2013) stated, “Policies that enable and even encourage blended learning can strengthen a university’s commitment to improve student learning as well as increase side benefits such as access, flexibility, and cost effectiveness” (p. 4). Fiscal constraints and other factors will determine what institutions are able to do with technology-based instruction, but using it in combination with face-to-face instruction may result in higher retention rates (Euzent et al., 2011).

For example, lecture classes with hundreds of students cannot provide the same level of student engagement as an online class with 15 students who have regular dialogue with each other and the professor. In a study conducted by Adam and Nel (2009), students reported greater satisfaction with blended learning classes due to regular face-to-face contact with the instructor and peers. Institutions with large, oversized lecture classes can adopt the hybrid format to improve student-to-student engagement.

Instructional leaders are challenged to find ways to successfully engage adult learners in online courses. Chen et al. (2008) documented the merits of e-learning but failed to comment on the format and design of online courses and did not address the question of whether perceptions of online learning were attractive to students who would not otherwise participate in higher education. This current study is intended to fill these gaps by exploring perceptions of adult students regarding hybrid courses. Findings will discuss whether hybrid courses for adult learners can sufficiently address the weaknesses encountered with strictly online classes and maximize the strengths experienced with online classes and face-to-face instruction. In summary, research has been conducted concerning obstacles encountered by adult nontraditional students regarding student engagement, degree persistence, and online learning. However, a gap exists in the current literature about adult nontraditional learners' perceptions of classes that utilizes hybrid course design and their perceptions of engagement and learning experiences.

The purpose of this chapter is to review and synthesize research related to factors that influence student perceptions of hybrid classes. This literature review section will explore the themes and theories associated with student perceptions of online and hybrid classes with regard to course design, format and technology, student engagement, student satisfaction, and degree persistence.

Student Perceptions of Online Course Design

This section will address the research related to perceptions of online and hybrid course design and student and faculty expectations regarding interactive e-instruction. The reasons students choose to take courses online instead of face-to-face are worthy of exploration to determine what perceptions exist regarding access, convenience, and quality of instruction. With the increased interest in technology-based courses by students and administrators, the prevalence

of online and hybrid courses is expected to increase (Platt et al., 2014). The range of student and institutional interpretations of blended learning is shown in Figure 1.

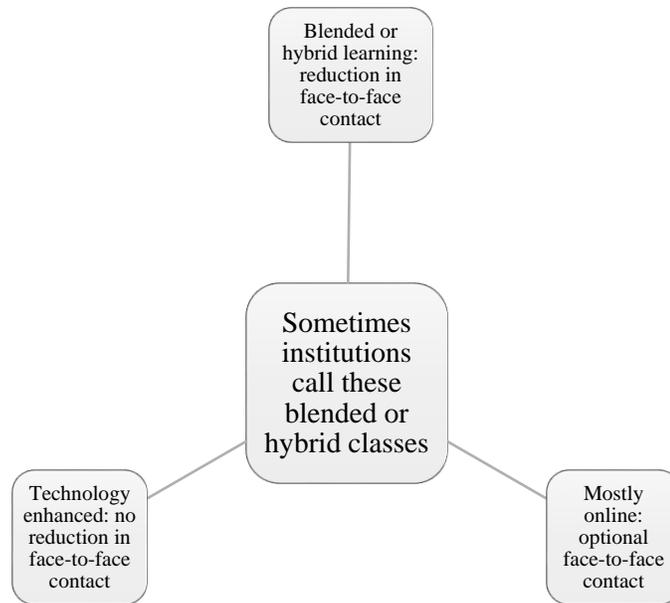


Figure 1. Spectrum of e-course delivery modalities (Graham et al., 2013).

Understanding student decision-making regarding online versus face-to-face instruction will help administrators determine whether blended or hybrid classes would be beneficial options. Adam and Nel (2009) conducted a case study that tracked and compared student grades and course evaluations of solely online, hybrid, and solely face-to-face class formats. Findings suggested that integrated approaches for instructional delivery with blended course design led to positive student perceptions (Adam & Nel, 2009).

In a study conducted by Euzent et al. (2011), students participated in two courses taught by the same professor but with different course designs. The purpose of the study was to assess student perceptions and performance in face-to-face and technology-enhanced courses. The results showed that there were no significant differences in terms of performance, and students rated both formats positively. However, the withdrawal rate from the online class was higher as

compared to the face-to-face class. Students indicated that they liked the flexibility of the online format and preferred it to the large, face-to-face lecture class. Similarly, Platt et al. (2014) surveyed 289 students regarding their perceptions of face-to-face and online instruction. Overall, students tended to perceive course content in online and face-to-face instruction to be equivalent. In both studies, instructors were rated highly, however, interactions with instructors were not equivalent when comparing online to face-to-face (Euzent et al., 2011; Platt et al., 2014). Students reported less interaction with their professors in online classes. Students rated their overall experiences as positive (Euzent et al., 2011), but individuals with less experience in online classes perceived the lack of interaction as potentially detrimental to their learning (Platt et al., 2014).

Beard, Harper, and Riley (2004) conducted a study in which 42 participants evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of face-to-face and online instruction. Results revealed a preference for the convenience of online instruction, yet a concern regarding decreased interaction with instructors (Beard et al., 2004). According to Adam and Nel (2009), utilizing hybrid course design is favored since it combines the benefits of face-to-face interaction with the convenience of online technology.

By offering a combination of onsite and online instruction, hybrid courses also provide added physical space since two classes can conceivably be offered at the same time in the same space on alternating schedules. Institutions have identified online courses as a viable institutional resource because they are available to students but do not pose building and space constraints; therefore, online courses are cost-effective (Platt et al., 2014). Student perceptions of the educational value they are receiving are of significance to administrators. Understanding student perceptions of online education can be useful in developing effective teaching strategies and

course design as well as marketing future online courses and programs (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007).

Blended and Hybrid Courses

Over the past decade, there has been an increase in the number of course offerings using blended formats to improve student engagement, critical thinking, and student success (Vaughan, 2009). Blended learning, or a hybrid approach, is a combination of both online coursework and face-to-face class time. Since learning styles and preferences vary, some students prefer face-to-face class settings in which instructors serve as facilitators. Others, however, prefer online course delivery, whereby students are independent and self-motivated to oversee their own instruction (Vaughn, 2009).

Beard et al. (2004) suggested utilizing multiple pedagogical practices to provide the best teaching methods to accommodate a variety of learning styles of students. Study findings by Sogunro (2015) showed that more than 95% of adult students considered the quality of online instruction as the motivation to take online courses. Additionally, more than 92% of participants identified an interactive online course as sufficient motivation to continue taking online courses. Several study participants explained that as adults they found lengthy lectures to be boring, lacking opportunities for them to engage in discussions and to learn through interaction from their classmates (Sogunro, 2015). These findings align with Knowles' theory of andragogy by demonstrating that adults desire to be engaged in their learning experiences and use prior knowledge and experiences as they assimilate new information (Knowles, 1973).

In the study by Roby et al., (2013), students and faculty were electronically surveyed with parallel instruments. The student survey examined demographic profiles; factors influencing decisions to enroll in blended classes; elements of online environments; issues of interaction; and

opinions of effective course size. The faculty survey examined demographic profiles; factors influencing their decision to teach online; resources available for teaching online; issues of interaction; and opinions regarding effective class size.

Vaughan (2009) and Wyatt (2011) examined student engagement and its impact on course design for online and face-to-face instruction. Vaughan's study (2009) explored a comparison of a passive instructional approach, such as lecture, to an active, engaged approach, such as collaborative studies. Vaughan's findings support increasing training and orientation for students and faculty to be better prepared to use technology and facilitate the learning process. Likewise, in the study conducted by Wyatt (2011), findings supported faculty training in pedagogical methods and resources to support student needs. Additionally, in Wyatt's (2011) study, student engagement and course design were explored in terms of degree completion for adult learners.

Findings of multiple studies on online and blended coursework support the following strategies for increasing the quality of educational experiences and outcomes: (a) provide technology training for students and instructors, (b) provide orientation sessions and institutional support for nontraditional students, and (c) provide training for faculty regarding pedagogical teaching methods and best practices for online and hybrid instruction (Roby et al., 2013; Vaughan, 2009; Wyatt, 2011).

Instructor Interaction and Instructional Design

In a qualitative study conducted by El Mansour and Mupinga (2007), 12 students rated instructor availability in hybrid courses as favorable. The remaining 41 students in the study participated in the online course and assigned high scores for both convenience and instructor availability (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). Several adult learners perceived a level of comfort with hybrid course delivery because it provided some interaction with instructors. The balance of

face-to-face time and independent study appealed to highly motivated and self-disciplined students (Arispe & Blake, 2012).

Recent studies indicate that students are now more comfortable with online technology, thus the perceived gap between online and face-to-face course delivery is decreasing (Euzent et al., 2011; Young & Norgard, 2006). In a six-year study by Adam and Nel (2009) more than 300 adult students in three different business subject courses rated the structure of blended coursework favorably if the instructor was engaged and interactive. Based on survey findings, Young and Norgard (2006) provided further evidence that students were more comfortable with technology: over 55% of participants said they agreed with the statement, “I feel more comfortable participating in online course discussions than in face-to-face course discussions” (p. 111).

In a study conducted by Hung and Chou (2015), students reported different expectations for the role of instructors in online and hybrid classes as compared to face-to-face classes. In this study, 750 university students identified the following five constructs pertaining to the role of instructors who used e-learning: (a) course designer, (b) discussion facilitator, (c) technology supporter, (d) social supporter, and (e) assessment designer (Hung & Chou, 2015). Students recognized the role of online instructors as instructional designers and facilitators of learning. In the traditional classroom with face-to-face instruction students viewed the role of instructors as lecturers and teachers. The role of instructional designer is to plan and prepare the course and the pathway for instruction and learning. According to Hung and Chou (2015), these forms of course design and management are essential to all types of e-learning.

The ability to be an independent learner has been recognized as an attribute of adult learners (Knowles, 1980); however, adult learners also appreciate the value of collaboration

through face-to-face networking and online interactions (Waha & Davis, 2014). Collaboration among adult students is a means of motivation for learning and engaging. Conversely, Sung and Mayer (2012) found that online learning presented a challenge because instructors and students were in different physical places which created a lack of social presence. Social presence refers to a sense in which students feel they are interacting and connecting in mediated communication (Sung & Mayer, 2012; Whiteside, 2015).

Social presence occurs as a consequence of participant perceptions, actions, and attitudes within the context (Gunawardena, 1995; Whiteside, 2015) and has been identified as a predictor for effective learning (Hostetter & Busch, 2016). Garrison (2009) identified the following three dimensions of social presence: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. According to Garrison (2009), social presence encourages students to identify with the course of study and communicate in an open and trusting environment in order to facilitate relationships.

Whiteside (2015) noted that higher levels of interaction equated to higher levels of social presence. Collaborative learning experiences are one method of developing social presence, which is relevant for courses designed for adult learners. As demonstrated in the research literature, collaborative learning experiences are meaningful to adult learners and can be integrated into online, hybrid, or other types of e-learning (Ausburn, 2004; Bowers, 2015; Ruey, 2010; Sung & Mayer, 2012).

Vygotsky's theory of social development (1976) was created long before the existence of e-learning and online learning. However, the foundation of this theory suggests that students learn from reflection, which online learning facilitates, especially when offered in an asynchronous format (Whiteside, 2015). According to Vygotsky (1986), a student reflects on his or her thoughts and then shares these thoughts with others such as the instructor and co-learners.

Thoughts are shared as the sender seeks validation from others, and the process moves back and forth as information is assimilated. This concept supports the notion that adult learners desire to share knowledge and experiences—to engage in the instructional process—as part of assimilating the new knowledge (Knowles, 1978).

According to Whiteside (2015), social presence is of value and occurs when students in online courses connect with one another through course content by reflecting and communicating with one other as they assimilate new knowledge. Transformational learning theory connects this reflective process to the cognitive and emotional dimensions of adult learning (Mezirow, 1990).

In El Mansour and Mupinga's (2007) study of positive and negative experiences of students in online and hybrid classes, negative perceptions were related to the requirement of scheduled-time for the face-to-face portion of the class. Students also identified occasional problems with technology as a negative attribute of online and hybrid courses (El Mansour & Mupinga, 2007). Arbaugh (2004) examined student perceptions of online MBA courses in terms of usefulness and ease of technology. Study findings revealed that students with prior technological experience had positive perceptions and greater satisfaction with online instruction (Arbaugh, 2004). Students had more flexibility with blended and online courses and perceived this flexibility as having more control over their learning (Euzent et al., 2011). Students who preferred some form of online learning identified convenience, flexibility, and availability as contributing to their satisfaction (Mupinga et al., 2012).

In order to achieve success in a learning environment, students frequently need to understand their learning styles and strive to pair this style with complementary teaching and course delivery methods (Ausburn, 2004). This also applies to the level of responsibility students assume for their learning as compared to their reliance on others (Ruey, 2010). For example,

students who function best with a rigid structure may struggle with the flexibility and convenience associated with online and hybrid courses. Kolb's (2000) theory regarding learning styles emphasizes a student's ability to adapt to learning. Kolb (2000) described a learning style as "A differential preference for learning, which changes slightly from situation to situation" (p.8). This definition is important when examining the relationship between course design and the nature of learning in hybrid classes.

Whiteside (2015) found that creating a social presence in hybrid classes was important for students and instructors to overcome the obstacles of multimodal learning. Therefore, exploration of student perceptions of instructional design may be helpful to instructors as they develop curriculum to improve content delivery and student performance.

Jackson and Helms (2008) utilized a method of assessment using strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (S.W.O.T.) to interpret student perceptions of senior-level business hybrid courses; this method of assessment allowed for free-form response. According to the authors, students assigned high ratings of interactions with professors in online and hybrid courses. These courses allowed students to establish face-to-face relationships and complete coursework online, which afforded them time to process and respond to course content.

This *extended time* provided every student an opportunity to think through questions before answering them in class discussions. According to Jackson and Helms (2008), this blended approach to meeting the unique needs of adult students, such as increased flexibility and less time and money spent on travel, has become increasingly appealing to adult students. In summary, the perceived strengths of online and hybrid courses as depicted in the research literature include the following:

- Greater flexibility and convenience.
- Ample time to respond to questions and assignments.
- Opportunities for all students to participate in class discussions.
- Face-to-face time in hybrid classes to develop rapport and improve communication.

Conversely, perceived weaknesses of online and hybrid instruction as demonstrated in the research literature includes the following:

- Less personal interaction that may impede communication.
- Student learning styles that do not match this mode of delivery.
- Increases in student procrastination.
- Concerns regarding the lack of face-to-face classroom spontaneity.

Course Format and Technology

Distance and online learning has become increasingly popular due to advancements in technology (Chen & Chiou, 2014; Klein et al., 2006; Ruey, 2010). Blended courses, also known as hybrid courses, are the result of technological advancements which enhance online learning by incorporating both face-to-face and online delivery. This model of integrating face-to-face and online instruction to provide more human interaction has been developed in response to student preferences (Klein et al., 2006). Blended learning provides adult learners with a design that facilitates a more flexible and collaborative approach to obtaining the desired outcomes. This section will address the research regarding online and blended course design; it will also discuss the impact of learning styles and technology on design and learning outcomes.

Course Format and Structure

Adult learners tend to take online and blended courses due to the flexibility and convenience of the course format (Ausburn, 2004). Klein et al. (2006) studied responses from

600 participants in a longitudinal study regarding learner preferences for online, face-to-face, and hybrid instruction. Study findings support the use of hybrid course design as a means to remove barriers to access which impacts learner motivation (Klein et al., 2006).

In a separate study, Ausburn (2004) examined the results of 67 adult learners and discovered that these students placed high value on flexible delivery options and two-way communication. Interaction with instructors was important to these adult learners; therefore, two-way communication that promoted collaboration and discussion of life experiences was appealing to them (Ausburn, 2004).

Research findings by Klein et al. (2006) and Shieh (2010) supports the proposition of matching student learning styles and personal characteristics, such as self-discipline and motivation, with course delivery format. Adult students need motivation for degree persistence, especially since academic and collegial engagement pose challenges for working adult students. According to Vaughan (2010), course design can be enhanced through critical thinking and reflection exercises since both are forms of positive student engagement.

Shieh (2010) used constructivist learning theory to learn about “why” and “how” course design affected adult students rather than focusing on learning as a passive experience. In this case study, adult students in two online courses were observed interacting with one another through collaboration. The author also noted that participants were improving personal attributes of responsibility and accountability through their interactions with others (Shieh, 2010).

Recent studies have demonstrated that student motivation influences student satisfaction, understanding and perception, and grades (Klein et al., 2006; Roby et al., 2013, Sogunro, 2015). Chen and Chiou (2014) found that students scored higher when they were in hybrid courses as compared to face-to-face courses. Data analytics measured at the eighth week of classes showed

that students logged into their online courses and reviewed curriculum content an average of 10 times more often than time spent reviewing other course resources (Chen & Chiou, 2014). This finding suggests technology made learning more convenient to access and may have motivated students to engage in course material more frequently.

Multiple authors have explored student perceptions of course format, satisfaction, and motivation among adult learners (Klein et al., 2006; Roby et al., 2013; Sogunro, 2015). Klein et al. (2016) determined that motivation to learn was significantly related to course delivery, and course delivery was perceived as either an enabler or barrier for access depending on the format. According to Roby et al. (2013), students reported their level of interest and motivation as “important” or “very important” and its influence on their decision to enroll in online courses. Additionally, students identified available technical support and communication regarding expectations as very important to their success (Roby et al., 2013). Findings by Sogunro (2015) indicated that quality instruction and interactive learning were closely associated with adult learner motivation.

In summary, multiple authors have demonstrated that the effectiveness of technology-based education using the hybrid course format relies on student motivation; pedagogy; personalization; access and flexibility; and efficient support resources for students and faculty (Ausburn, 2004; Klein et al., 2006; Roby et al., 2013; Sogunro, 2015).

Learning Styles and Strategies

According to Roby et al. (2013), instructors of online courses may find it difficult to design courses that promote student engagement due to the student-centered nature of the online instructional format; this same challenge applies to instructors of hybrid course design. Baran,

Correia, and Thompson (2011) observed that instructors tended to design online and blended courses with the same traditional pedagogical methods they used for face-to-face courses.

Porter et al. (2014) found that pedagogy influenced instructional effectiveness and learning outcomes. The authors explored the transition process of one institution of higher education as it implemented blended courses and shared these data with 11 other institutions for adoption and implementation. Based on study findings, the authors recommended institutions develop the infrastructure necessary to support the technological and pedagogical training required to adopt, implement, and sustain blended learning and hybrid courses (Porter et al., 2013).

The instructional design objective for blended courses is to use pedagogy to develop collaborative learning, critical thinking, and simulated activities in both the online and face-to-face components of the course (Klein et al., 2006; Porter et al., 2014). According to Shieh (2010), adult learning styles benefit from the face-to-face portion of hybrid courses. Furthermore, students rated face-to-face interactions as important for developing relationships and enhancing communication efforts between students and instructors and among class members.

Technology

Access to higher education is influenced by the technology used for online and blended learning (Graham et al., 2013; Porter et al., 2014; Young & Norgard, 2006). Since technology eliminates geographical boundaries, and the flexibility for scheduling increases options for course availability, online and hybrid courses are increasing college access for nontraditional adult students (Klein et al., 2006). According to Graham et al. (2013), a strong technological

infrastructure and enhanced training to use the resources for blended learning are key components for successful and effective implementation of blended courses.

Graham et al. (2013) found that institutions which had implemented hybrid courses reported the use of technology for instruction as beneficial provided the technology was functioning and user-friendly. Prior to enrolling students in hybrid courses, the authors recommended coordinating and communicating the parameters and expectations of the hybrid course format with students (Porter et al., 2014). Effective communication allows students the opportunity to prepare for the course and to determine if the hybrid format is well-suited to their learning style. Since hybrid courses rely heavily on technology, institutions must prepare instructors with training, support, and resources to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of the delivery (Graham et al., 2013). Once an institution determines that it will implement hybrid courses, the institution must establish the necessary infrastructure to support the needs of instructors and students to ensure success (Graham et al., 2013).

Hybrid courses may be taught using asynchronous or synchronous designs for the online portion of the course, or a combination of the two (Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013). The synchronous design requires that all students participate in the course at the same time, much like attending a course with face-to-face instruction. An asynchronous course design allows students to participate at their convenience; therefore, not all students must be actively engaged in the course at the same time. Oztok et al. (2013) studied the use of both synchronous and asynchronous delivery systems. Synchronous technology was used for private messaging between students and/or the instructor, and asynchronous technology was used for discussion forums. Regardless of whether online or hybrid courses are taught synchronously or asynchronously, a key factor in student success is to provide training that promotes “learning

how to learn online” so that students will be prepared to learn the content (Arbaugh, 2004, p.173).

Student Engagement

According to Ausburn (2004), the adult student population is one of the fastest growing college populations in the nation, and it includes the highest percentage of online learners. The unique challenges faced by this population have a profound influence on student success and retention. Therefore, a need exists to address student engagement among nontraditional adult learners because student engagement is linked to student retention and persistence (Wyatt, 2011). Kuh’s (2009) definition of student engagement illustrates the broad implications of this concept:

The engagement premise is straightforward and easily understood: the more students study a subject, the more they know about it, and the more students practice and get feedback from faculty and staff members on their writing and collaborative problem solving, the deeper they come to understand what they are learning and the more adept they become at managing complexity, tolerating ambiguity, and working with people from different backgrounds or with different views. (p. 9)

Based on this definition, student engagement is a forerunner to constructing understanding, knowledge, and relationships. According to Deschacht and Goeman (2015), student engagement is considerably different between adult learners and younger, traditional-age students. Arbaugh (2004) explained this difference noting that many adult students have had some previous experience as a traditional student. For these adult students, the role moves from one of passively receiving knowledge to one of constructing their own learning through the dual role of dispenser and recipient of knowledge.

Additionally, some adult learners experience an adjustment to learning online as they navigate the technology and responsibilities associated with being a student (Arbaugh, 2004). Specifically, adult learners and instructors experience a period of adjustment associated with their respective roles in the context of adult learning as well as the use of technology with a multimodal format. This section will discuss the issues regarding student engagement, its impact on student success, and the means by which colleges and universities are addressing these issues by examining institutional culture and services.

Factors Related to Student Engagement

Institutional leaders face challenges regarding how to effectively engage the various student populations represented on their campuses. With an increase in online enrollments, college leaders need to examine the level of engagement experienced by online students and the impact it has on retention. According to Chen et al. (2008), student engagement is a precursor to developing lifetime habits for continual learning. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) defines student engagement as the time and effort students devote to their educational experience (NSEE, n.d.).

The purpose of the study conducted by Chen et al. (2008) was to compare the level of student engagement between undergraduate students in online courses to those of undergraduate students in face-to-face conventional courses. Using MANCOVA results and descriptive statistics, the authors showed that online students scored higher in terms of student engagement in most areas except for active, collaborative, and interactive learning (Chen et al., 2008). The findings also showed that older distance or online students engaged in higher level thinking activities such as analysis and synthesis, whereas younger online students engaged more frequently in interactive activities such as working in groups to solve problems.

Using Pittaway's (2012) engagement framework, which address the personal, social, intellectual, academic, and professional elements for effective student engagement, O'Shea, Stone, and Delahunty (2015) identified the following aspects of student engagement: (1) faculty and staff must be supportive and engaging; (2) students must recognize their role for taking responsibility for their learning; (3) faculty and students must maintain respectful relationships; and (4) faculty must provide clearly communicated expectations. According to the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2005), postsecondary institutions can facilitate these four areas of student engagement for adults by applying effective principles, such as: providing outreach efforts that help students overcome barriers; providing support services to enhance students' capacities to take responsibility for their learning; and providing multiple methods of instruction with clearly communicated learning outcomes.

Institutional Culture and Services

Concern for student engagement related to online learning is high, but there is also concern about the quality of educational programs that are delivered through online and hybrid learning (Simpson & Benson, 2013) and matriculation rates (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). This concern is particularly salient to student engagement because the quality of course design and instruction affects student experiences. In terms of course structure, adult learners generally learn best when they can integrate their life experiences with course content (Yoo & Huang, 2013). Based on recent research, colleges and universities need to promote course design and engagement opportunities that allow adult students to connect their classroom and real-world experiences (Ausburn, 2004; Chen et al., 2008; Wyatt, 2011).

Goncalves and Trunk (2014), provided suggestions for improving student engagement based on discussions with 10 nontraditional adult students regarding obstacles to degree

completion. These adult nontraditional students expressed mixed responses regarding the best ways to incorporate student engagement (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).

While some students expressed a preference for anonymity regarding recognition as a nontraditional student, others expressed a desire for the support that stems from identifying with a group of nontraditional students. Based on these results and findings from previously mentioned studies, researchers support the conclusion that adult students consider consistent interaction and communication with instructors a priority for engagement and success (Ausburn 2004; Beard et al., 2004; Chen et al., 2008; Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011).

Student Engagement and Academic Persistence

Taniguchi and Kaufman (2005) discussed the significant positive links between part-time adult students and decreased rates of academic persistence, also known as degree persistence. The authors examined factors that contributed to the rate of non-completion of academic degrees affecting adult students (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Study findings included the following: part-time enrollment hinders degree completion; strong employment status and cognitive aptitude increase the likelihood of degree completion; and single parenthood hinders degree completion (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005).

Attending an institution of higher education with online and e-learning options allows adult students to close the gap to degree persistence because it provides options to meet student needs for convenience and flexibility. Nevertheless, Blackmon and Major (2012) noted that some students enrolled in online learning courses experienced a sense of isolation due to a perceived lack of connectedness with other students. This sense of isolation can have a negative effect on degree completion. As previously mentioned developing social presence, coupled with the

characteristics of convenience and flexibility, may enhance the learning environment and make it more conducive to degree persistence for adult learners.

Although adult students frequently perceive engagement as interaction with instructors, recent research findings suggested that student engagement includes both social and cognitive interaction as necessary for student engagement (Wyatt, 2011). Based on interviews with 19 participants, O'Shea et al. (2015) used a narrative approach to express perceptions and experiences of social engagement, academic engagement, and personal engagement. The authors reported student engagement as a major contributor to degree persistence and completion.

Goncalves and Trunk (2014) recommended that institutions consider addressing student engagement by implementing best practices related to curriculum, training, resources, and communication. Based on participant interviews, the authors noted that adult students positively perceived interactions with instructors but would be interested in additional engagement opportunities, such as mentorship, flexibility with classes, and improved advising (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).

Adult Learners

There is a gap in the literature regarding information about adult learners' engagement with online learning. Yet, results from the 2006 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) revealed that older adult students were less likely to engage in the areas of working collaboratively on projects during class. Additionally, there appears to be a lack of collaboration outside of class in preparing for assignments (Chen et al., 2008).

Findings from NSSE 2006 suggest that the lack of preparation is likely due to challenges faced by adult students returning to college, including inadequate preparation for the rigor and level of college academics (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005; Wyatt, 2011). These challenges,

coupled with the demands of work and family, create a less favorable environment for student engagement. Adult students may also struggle with establishing a sense of belonging (feeling connected) and maintaining self-confidence, thus making the adult student reluctant to engage in social connectedness and intimidated by the academic experience.

Adult students comprise a large percentage of distance learners, and many of these students have additional priorities in their lives, such as work and family responsibilities (Yoo & Huang, 2013). Due to these obligations, adult students tend to favor online and hybrid course formats for their convenience and flexibility (Chen et al., 2008). Adult students may also have a preference for online education because it allows them to work at their own pace and become independent learners (Chen et al., 2008; Yoo & Huang, 2013).

The perceptions by adult students regarding blended learning are favorable despite some of the aforementioned challenges of adult learners (Deschacht & Goeman, 2015). According to Deschacht and Goeman (2015), the blended course format showed an increase in pass rates for groups of students including adult learners. Also, enrollment gaps for nontraditional adult students enrolled in online or hybrid classes were lower than those of nontraditional adult students enrolled in strictly face-to-face classes (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). One factor that might affect grades and completion rates is enrollment status. Taniguchi and Kaufman (2015) found that part-time enrollment affected completion rates for nontraditional students which may have been due to prolonged periods of time to degree completion.

With two-thirds of study participants over 25 years of age and considered to be “older” or “adult” students, Chen et al. (2008) noted that older students in some type of online learning were less likely to engage in collaborative learning activities with others in the class as compared to younger students. However, older students in online courses showed a preference for learning

activities that involved analysis and synthesis as compared to their younger peers (Chen et al., 2008). These findings suggest that students in online classes may not be engaged through collaborative activities, but they positively perceived engagement through communication with instructors and learning activities that promoted analysis and synthesis (Chen et al., 2008).

Student Satisfaction and Persistence

With adult students increasingly becoming the fastest growing student population in the nation, and representing a large portion of the online student population, there is concern for their rates of overall satisfaction and degree completion (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Increasing rates of retention and degree completion is important to institutions and policymakers as accountability questions mount (Simpson & Benson, 2013). Understanding student satisfaction and degree persistence may be critical factors in improving student engagement and ultimately closing the attrition gap for adult learners (Chen et al., 2008; Yoo & Huang, 2013).

Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is an important factor for institutions to consider when designing online and hybrid courses. Simpson and Benson (2014) showed that factors such as age and gender were non-significant to the overall satisfaction of students regarding online courses. However, student comfort and student perceptions were significantly related to overall student satisfaction (Simpson & Benson, 2014).

Euzent et al. (2011) found that student satisfaction was rooted in instructional design as compared to mode of delivery. With the increase in nontraditional student enrollments, online courses designed with user-friendly technology can foster effective instructional delivery. The blended or hybrid course design has been described as providing the best of both worlds by alternating face-to-face class time with online instruction. Instructional design, particularly

online delivery modalities that accommodate student needs and schedules, is perceived by students as a means of increasing course access which increases student satisfaction and retention (Euzent et al., 2011; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015).

Motivational Factors Influencing Persistence

Student engagement encourages learners to develop intrinsic motivation and to take responsibility and ownership for their academic achievement in online learning (O'Shea et al., 2015; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Intrinsic motivation is the requisite foundation for adult students to persist and succeed because it enables them to overcome challenges and obstacles. Yoo and Huang (2013) investigated the factors associated with adult learners' motivation for online learning and engagement. The authors reported that external motivators, such as workforce development and career promotion, were helpful to adult students in terms of degree persistence, but intrinsic motivation was key to developing autonomous, responsible learners.

In contrast, Arispe and Blake (2012) noted that online and hybrid courses may not be beneficial or compatible with all learning styles. The authors found that the online format worked best with highly motivated and self-disciplined learners. The extent to which engagement, or connectedness, exists for adult learners in online and hybrid courses is a factor for predicting learning effectiveness (Arbaugh, 2004). Therefore, students who participate and engage in online or hybrid learning experiences as active rather than passive learners are more likely to persist to degree completion.

According to Pontes and Pontes (2012), the increased use of hybrid courses has led to higher course completion rates compared to courses offered as face-to-face or strictly online. Among nontraditional students, the likelihood of an enrollment gap decreases for students enrolled in hybrid courses as compared to face-to-face courses (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Yoo and

Huang (2013) observed that online and hybrid degree programs with adult student populations improved retention and persistence rates when career development opportunities were incorporated into the experience. The authors noted that these types of experience-based activities engaged students throughout their degree programs.

Degree Completion

According to Goncalves and Trunk (2014), attrition rates are reportedly higher for adult students compared to those of traditional students; this difference is likely due to minimal engagement and immersion of adult learners into the culture and environment of higher education. Chen et al. (2008) observed that adult students have numerous priorities in their lives which can limit student engagement. Student engagement, however, can be effective when educational experiences such as online and hybrid courses are offered and designed with the needs of adult students in mind. These experiences, in turn, can increase student satisfaction.

Goncalves and Trunk (2014) revealed that adult learners reported high levels of student satisfaction based on increased levels of interaction with instructors. Blended learning and hybrid courses provide the structure to meet the needs of adult students seeking engagement through interaction with instructors while also providing convenience and flexibility (Ausburn, 2004; Porter et al., 2014).

The increase in adult nontraditional students coincides with the increase in online learning. Using data from NPSAS 2008, Pontes and Pontes (2012) reported that the majority of college undergraduate students are nontraditional students. Furthermore, these students are more likely to enroll in online and hybrid courses. According to the authors, more than 50% of nontraditional students have enrollment gaps in an academic year, which means they are not enrolled for part of the academic year (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Enrollment gaps put students at

higher risk for dropping out (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). Online courses for adult learners may lower the likelihood of an enrollment gap that could hinder degree completion (Pontes & Pontes, 2012).

Ausburn (2004) recommended the hybrid instructional model as ideal for adult students because it combines the flexibility of online learning with the collaborative experiences that adults prefer. Student perceptions and preferences are factors to consider regarding student satisfaction.

Theoretical Framework

I used the theory of andragogy as the theoretical framework to guide this research. Knowles (1980) defined andragogy as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43) as contrasted with pedagogy, the science of helping children learn. Andragogy is based on assumptions related to adults and their development and life experiences (Knowles, 1968; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). There are five assumptions which form the foundation of andragogy and used to describe the adult learner. The first four assumptions, developed by Knowles (1980), identify the adult learner as:

- (1) independent and self-directed;
- (2) using life experiences as a resource for learning;
- (3) demonstrating readiness for learning based on needs that reflect social roles;
- (4) being problem-solving centered.

More recently, Knowles (1984) added a fifth assumption:

- (5) Adult learners are intrinsically motivated to learn and need to know why they are required to learn something.

Knowles (1980) referred to this theory of andragogy as a “model of assumptions” (p. 43) and a “system of concepts” (Knowles, 1984, p. 8). Knowles further described andragogy as a continuum of pedagogy, and, depending on the situation, an adult might be more dependent on the teacher for instruction, just as the situation may occur where a child who is very curious may be more self-directed in his or her learning (Knowles, 1984). Despite the continued debate of andragogy as a theory or a concept, it is a widely accepted term. Andragogy contributes to the foundation of understanding how adults learn and is frequently referred to by educators as a theory (Merriam et al., 2007).

The opinions on andragogy have taken a different direction since 1990. Houle (1996), Knowles’s mentor and author of a number of books on adult education, suggested:

Education is fundamentally the same wherever and whenever it occurs. It deals with such basic concerns as the nature of the learner, the goals sought, and the social and physical milieu in which instruction occurs, and the techniques of learning or teaching used. These and other components may be combined in infinite ways. . . . Andragogy remains as the most learner-centered of all patterns of adult educational programming. (pp. 29-30)

In explaining the impact of andragogy on adult learning theory, Merriam (2001) suggested that it will maintain its role in higher education, a continual force to enrich research and debate and help educators to develop an understanding of the adult learner. Knowles (1989) concurred that andragogy is less a theory of adult learning than “a model of assumptions about learning or conceptual framework that serves as a basis for an emergent theory” (p. 112).

For this research, I also used the concept of social constructivism as the philosophical orientation to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Constructivism maintains that learning is a process whereby people make sense of their experiences and learning occurs (Merriam et al., 2007).

Constructivism is the philosophy that knowledge is in the minds of individuals and is constructed based on experiences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Social constructivists, such as Vygotsky, posit that learning is constructed through social interaction and culturally shared (Vygotsky, 1978). When learning occurs it is shaped by the context, communication, and collaboration with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky put special emphasis on the cultural and social interactions that help to construct knowledge (Palincsar, 1998). This research represents my attempt to understand how nontraditional adult students constructed meaning (engagement) and knowledge based on their own experiences in hybrid classes.

Using social constructivism as the philosophical paradigm for the interpretive framework guiding this research, I explored the perceptions of participants regarding their experiences of learning and engagement in hybrid courses (Creswell, 2013). Andragogy was used as the theoretical framework for understanding the adult learner, and social constructivism was used as the philosophical orientation of learning concerning hybrid courses. I chose andragogy and social constructivism because learning takes place through collaborative engagement, communication, and social interaction with nontraditional adult students.

Knowledge is constructed through meaning-making progressions (Oztok et al., 2013). According to Crotty (1998), knowledge is developed and transmitted through interactive human communities. Adult student learners whether first-time students or re-entry students pursue college to reinvent themselves. They do this through a new learning environment and culture of people to expand their thinking and expertise (Kasworm, 2008). The design of hybrid courses, with some class meetings online and other class meetings in the classroom, uses the social construction of knowledge through conversation, collaboration, and interaction, all of which appeals to the adult learner.

Summary

My intent, as the researcher, was to make sense of the experiences of adult nontraditional students regarding hybrid learning course design. Using the theoretical framework of andragogy (Knowles, 1978), this research explored the perceptions of adult learners toward hybrid learning and course design and specifically student perceptions of their learning experiences.

This literature review provided scholarly information from researchers who have explored and examined online and hybrid course learning, adult learning, and student engagement. Based on this review, it can be concluded that there is continued interest regarding e-learning, or multimodal learning, and increased enrollment of adult learners in higher education. Instructors and administrators in higher education recognize the importance of understanding the factors that contribute to increases in adult student enrollments and greater use of online and hybrid courses. These issues are relevant to this study given the population group, the trends in e-learning, and the need to understand perceptions of adult learners toward hybrid courses and student engagement.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter will provide the rationale for the approach used for this research and address the research methods. In this study, I explored the perceptions of adult nontraditional students based on their experiences with hybrid classes at a private university. I also explored adult student perceptions of student engagement within the context of adult learning and the hybrid course format. This chapter includes a brief autobiographical background of the researcher and the methodology used to conduct research including: (a) research rationale, (b) research design, (c) research question, (d) site and subject selection, (e) data collection, (f) data analysis, (g) positionality statement, (h) autobiographical information, (i) limitations, and (j) quality assurance.

Statement of and Rationale for Overall Research Approach

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of adult learners regarding hybrid courses they completed within a continuing studies unit of a leading research university. At the time of this study, hybrid courses were a relatively new method of instruction at this institution. Student interest in hybrid courses was relatively consistent, and both students and faculty were inquiring about expansion of hybrid course offerings. Some administrators, however, were skeptical about the effectiveness of hybrid courses. This study provided an in-depth look at hybrid courses to further understand student perceptions of course design, student

interaction, and satisfaction. In this study, I examined adult student experiences with hybrid courses and their perceptions of student engagement while enrolled.

In order to understand nontraditional adult learner experiences in hybrid classes, I employed a qualitative design to listen to others' experience and then retell the accounts in order to give voice to the students in this population (Glesne, 2006). In particular, I employed a case study approach with phenomenological underpinnings for this qualitative study. Since case study research focuses on a phenomenon and often on topics such as programs (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011), this approach was considered the best method to answer the research questions and thereby fulfill the purpose of the research.

To study this issue, I collected data from participants using individual interviews both in-person while at their respective site locations and over the phone. This study was an emergent design; therefore, the primary goal was to learn about the experiences of adult students who experienced blended learning via hybrid classes. As an emergent design, the process was modified as needed to obtain the needed information (Creswell, 2013).

As explained by Moustakas (1994), transcendental phenomenology focuses more on the descriptive experiences of participants and less on interpretations of the researcher. As the researcher, I was interested in learning more about the lived experiences of participants; not only to know what participants experienced but also to understand how they experienced the phenomenon (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

According to Moustakas (1994), these data reveal "what" was experienced and "how" it was experienced and then are expressed to the researcher. Data were analyzed and reduced compartmentally into themes that described the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of qualitative research is to seek understanding of a phenomenon or context, which was

accomplished in this study by interviewing and listening to participants. During and after participant interviews, I listened to what the participants said and then proceeded to analyze, interpret, and synthesize the accounts shared by participants.

Research Design

In order to understand the experiences and perceptions of adult learners toward hybrid classes, I employed a qualitative design for this study. In comparison, quantitative research provides statistical evidence and data but does not provide an understanding of the social complexities that qualitative research inquiry can provide. Savin-Baden and Major (2013) assigned the following characteristics to qualitative research:

- it is based on a given worldview or philosophy; there are several options;
- it has a subjective and personal orientation;
- it has emic perspective (behavior or belief of participant);
- it occurs in natural settings;
- it uses an analytic process that is inductive/holistic;
- it uses data from multiple sources; uses rich description beyond detail. (p. 15)

Qualitative research conveys the experiences of study participants, and it can also help to more fully describe the phenomenon from the reader's perspective. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the information garnered from qualitative research uses interpretation to discover "lessons learned" and is easily understood by others because it is presented in a form in which individuals experienced it.

Qualitative research provides rich detail and description of participant experiences beyond reporting detail, thus making it meaningful to the reader (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Interpretations of qualitative research may be based on intuition and hunches in order to make

sense of the data. Researchers use their interpretations as links to the larger body of knowledge and research literature. This form of research helps to make the experiences identifiable for participants and readers as well as the researcher.

The epistemological assumption of conducting this qualitative study allowed for subjective evidence from participants regarding their perceptions and experiences which provided the knowledge sought from this study. The goal was to obtain information for shared patterns of behavior and beliefs by nontraditional adult students regarding their experiences with hybrid learning.

Phenomenology and case studies are common approaches for qualitative research. A phenomenological study is one that describes the common lived experiences of participants related to a single concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A case study is one that focuses on representation of a group (e.g., adult students) or a phenomenon (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). The value in this phenomenological case study is that it offers an understanding of the common experiences in order to develop policies or practices to improve the experiences of adult learners in hybrid courses.

Using Moustakas's (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenology, I focused less on my own interpretations and more on the descriptive experiences of the phenomenon as experienced by the participants (Hancock & Algozzine, 2011). Based on the chart for designing phenomenological research created by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), an outline can be seen in Table 1 which served as the guideline for this study:

Table 1

Guideline for study

Design	Specifics
Philosophical stance	Case study with phenomenological underpinnings.
Personal stance	High degree of disclosure of positionality; transparency
Who or what of the study	Adult student experiences with hybrid learning
Research topic	Explore and understand how adult learners collectively experience hybrid learning at a private university with a unit dedicated to nontraditional students
Time/place/participants	Spring 2017 semester; campus locations where students are enrolled – pseudonyms are Empire, which is near the main campus, and Mosaic, which is 200 miles from the main campus; maximum variation sampling: nontraditional adult students who have been enrolled in at least one hybrid course
Ethics	IRB approval; individual informed consent forms; respect for individuals; provide confidentiality; do all things with excellence as the standard; researcher transparency. The instructional sites and interviewees were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities and assure confidentiality
Fieldwork	Interviews
Data collection	Semi-structured interviews
Data handling	Coding of themes
Analysis	Interpretive phenomenological analysis
Interpretation	Explain and translate meaning of data
Quality	Peer review; dense description; relevance
Researcher voice	Observer; reporter

Main Research Question and Potential Sub-questions

The overarching research question was:

How do nontraditional adult learners experience engagement in hybrid courses?

The subset of questions was as follows:

- How do adult students understand and define hybrid courses as a form of blended learning?
- How do adult students perceive engagement as a college student?
- How do adult students perceive student engagement in hybrid courses?

- What do engaged learners perceive engaged them in hybrid classes? Is it intellectual, social, content, or a combination of these?

I used a semi-structured approach to interviews. Rather than being bound to the list of questions, I used questions as a guide for the protocol. This approach allowed me to share my interests with participants without influencing their responses and provided participants with a sense of engagement through conversation.

Site Selection and Rationale

The study was conducted at two of the instructional sites for a privately endowed research university in the southeastern region of the United States, specifically at the university's School of Continuing Studies, in which over 65% of the student population is over the age of 25. Of the 8,452 undergraduates enrolled in the university in the 2016-2017 academic year, 1,429 students were enrolled in this part-time, continuing studies division. Of these students, 951 students, or 66.5%, were 25 years old and older.

Hybrid courses were introduced in the School of Continuing Studies as a pilot program in 2015, and the need existed to understand adult learner perceptions of these courses. Originally, the site selected for this study was one of the off-campus instructional sites located near the main campus of the institution. The purpose of selecting a single site was based on the assumption that it would be advantageous for the research to focus on a single site to gain deeper insight and information from participants at this institution (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

However, due to the low response rate from students at the original site, I decided I also needed to include students from another site, which was also the site of my work. After submitting the request to the IRB office, and receiving IRB approval, I proceeded to follow the same procedures for obtaining participants from this additional instructional site. The Empire site

was located near the main campus, and the Mosaic site was located 200 miles from the main campus. Interviews were conducted at the respective campus sites in a conference room or private office, as they provided comfort, convenience, and a confidential environment to protect privacy. Study participants were familiar with the site and location of the interviews, but participants at the Empire site did not have a previous connection or relationship with the researcher. Several participants from the Mosaic site did know the researcher but the relationship was one through administration—not a relationship in which they had known the researcher as an instructor.

Participant Selection and Rationale

Adult learners have options for face-to-face learning and e-learning. Overcoming obstacles in pursuit of obtaining a degree is often one of the major issues facing adult learners. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) reported that 38% of nontraditional students stop-out or drop-out of college after the first year. The hybrid course format is an option intended to meet the needs of nontraditional adult students. Therefore, I selected adult learners as the focus of this research.

I used maximum variation sampling because I determined in advance the criteria of selection and wanted to gain the widest range of responses. Maximum variation sampling allowed for maximum differences regarding perceptions of experiences with hybrid classes by an information-rich population (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). While individuals had to have taken at least one hybrid course to be included as participants in the study, the maximum variation sampling approach worked well because it increased the likelihood of different perspectives (Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Instructional sites and participants were given pseudonyms to protect confidentiality. Selected participants were from the Empire instructional site, where students did not have a

direct relationship with me, and from the Mosaic instructional site 200 miles away, where students knew me but did not have a student-instructor relationship with me. I decided to use my campus instructional site because the study would be enhanced with 20 participants rather than just eight from the Empire site. I was also interested in student perceptions of hybrid classes in Mosaic because the Mosaic site was the first to offer hybrid classes for the School of Continuing Studies. As the researcher, I was confident that the participants from the Mosaic site would feel comfortable with being honest and forthcoming with me.

Students at each of these instructional sites were notified about this research study through visual informational notices posted at the sites. Each of these sites had students with an enrollment history in hybrid courses. Also, I was present on each campus prior to initiating the study to visit with students and answer questions about the research. After the informational notices were posted, students received a letter and were invited to participate in the study. The purpose of the letter was to once again explain the research topic, invite students to participate, and request that students complete a survey to ensure they had taken at least one hybrid course at the university's School of Continuing Studies. Once students expressed interest in participating in the study, they were given the informed consent form. A total of 118 letters were sent; 19 current students responded to the letter as well as one student who recently graduated.

According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative research that incorporates a phenomenological approach uses a small number of participants to identify patterns of meaning. As the researcher, I sought to have a minimum of 15 qualifying participants and a maximum of 20 qualifying students in the study. The study group was comprised of 19 students who consented to participate in the study and intended to maintain their status as students at the university through spring 2017. Additionally, there was one other student, a recent graduate of

the program, who expressed interest and volunteered to participate in the study, thus providing a total of 20 participants. Yet one more student contacted me to express interest in participating but this occurred two weeks after the first set of interviews had been conducted and I had already obtained more than the minimum number of students. For these reasons, I did not include this student in the study.

I thanked study participants for their time by providing each with a \$15 iTunes gift card as an expression of my appreciation. Participants were each sent a copy of the transcription of their interview and encouraged to provide feedback to the researcher.

Data Collection Procedures

After obtaining approval from the Institution Review Boards at The University of Alabama and the selected site university, letters of invitation were sent to students enrolled at the instructional site inviting them to participate in the study (see Appendix B). Once participants were identified, informed consent forms from the participants were secured (see Appendix C). I conducted interviews using an interview protocol (see Appendix D).

Interview questions were not framed as leading questions, and the results were shared with study participants. Two interviews with each participant were individually conducted and arranged at the convenience of the participants. The first interview was conducted face-to-face, and the second interview was conducted via phone or virtual meeting using Skype, depending on each participant's availability. Information was stored on the researcher's personal computer files and through transcriptions.

For the interview protocol, I used open-ended and semi-structured questions (see Appendices E and F). The semi-structured questions served as an interview guide. This guide helped me conduct the interview and ensured that participants were asked the same questions.

The interview guides also aided me with keeping the discussion on track and staying within the time frame promised to participants (Hoepfl, 1997). The interview protocol included a header to record essential information about the study and served as a reminder to discuss the purpose of the study with each participant. It also included a closing comment to thank each interviewee and to request a follow-up meeting if necessary (Creswell, 2013).

While I followed the prepared set of questions as a guide to ensure that the same information was obtained from each participant, I also used additional probing questions as appropriate. By using this type of interview process, I am able to provide the reader with an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of adult students toward hybrid classes. Since there are no right or wrong responses probing questions allowed me to explore further responses within various lines of inquiry (Creswell, 2013).

Interviews were conducted twice with different sets of questions (see Appendices E and F for questions). Interview questions were designed to be open-ended, thus allowing each participant the freedom to answer honestly. The purpose of obtaining information from open-ended questions was to learn about the experiences and perceptions of participants (Schuh, 2009). My intention was to avoid leading questions that suggested a particular response. My objective was to ask appropriate questions so that participants would feel comfortable to discuss their experiences with me (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

Interviews were digitally recorded, and I took additional, handwritten notes as needed. I made notes following the interviews while observations were still fresh in my mind. Each interview was scheduled for one hour, and recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim. When I transcribed the interviews, I incorporated my notes and comments regarding my observations. For example, the tone of voice often provided insights to what was verbally expressed along with

facial expressions. It was helpful for me to refer to these memos when reviewing the transcriptions. An example of this occurred when interviewing Cheryl (see Table 1). She was sharing information about her first semester as a continuing education student. She experienced a few hurdles but laughed at some things indicating that her perspective was light and easy going regarding the experience. This strategy of keeping memos was important, since the written word can be limiting. Observations helped me capture non-verbal communication and fully understand what the participant was expressing,

Data Analysis Techniques

The transcription process involved listening to the taped recordings of the interviews, typing the words of the participants, and using my notes and observations. Data for this study consisted of these interview transcriptions and the memos made from my observations during the interviews. I analyzed the data by reviewing responses to each question in sequential order by each participant.

According to Madden (2010), the coding process involves an interpretation of data by the researcher. This can add value to the analysis and to the research rather than diminish the outcome. As defined by Saldaña (2013), codes are words or short phrases that symbolically capture the essence of what the participant is communicating through data inquiry. The goal is to discover how codes and themes link together because the themes are the outcomes of coding, and thus allow the researcher to identify patterns and concepts.

I started my coding process using *in vivo* coding in order to review the exact words and phrases used by participants. I also used *holistic coding* because it allowed me to group ideas and text into themes. This technique allowed me to better define emergent themes. The use of

emotion and *values coding* allowed me to gain insight into the feelings and attitudes of the participants.

To analyze the data, I began by reading each transcription, evaluating the coding, and marking themes that were apparent. I made notes regarding common themes. According to Saldaña (2013), theme analysis involves examining the relationships among fields and how they are linked to the whole meaning. I also used NVivo 11 software to assist me with sorting codes and themes. The NVivo software provided a platform for me to organize my interview transcriptions and notes. It was useful to compare the themes I found when manually reviewing the transcripts to those processed by the NVivo 11 software.

I analyzed and reduced data compartmentally into themes that described the essence of the experience (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, based on transcendental phenomenology, I focused more on the descriptive experiences of participants and less on my own interpretations. Based on an approach suggested by Creswell (2013), the following outline was used for methods of data analysis:

- (1) Provide and explain my personal experiences with the phenomenon of blended learning.
- (2) Create a list of significant statements that express how participants are experiencing the phenomenon.
- (3) Group the statements into themes.
- (4) Write the “textural description,” the “structural description,” and the “essence” representing the culminating aspect of the study. (Creswell, 2013, p. 82)

In summary, I used both Creswell’s approach and the coding methods suggested by Saldaña (2013). Specifically, I used holistic, in vivo, emotions, and values coding as described by Saldaña. Holistic coding was used to organize data from interviews, notes, and documents

into themes or chunks of topic areas. In vivo coding was used to give “voice” to adult nontraditional students because their experiences and perceptions are different from those of traditional students.

Emotions coding was appropriate for exploring experiences of participants, particularly interpersonal experiences and interactions (Saldaña, 2013), thus providing insight into the perspectives of the participants. Values coding was used because it reflects the attitudes and beliefs of participants in the study, thus providing insight into what participants saw as important, such as self, others, experiences, or ideas. For example, a number of participants emphasized the value of spending time with their families. This value was relevant to their perceptions of hybrid classes because they viewed it as a benefit experienced with the hybrid format. This attitude also influenced their overall perception of how much and what kind of student engagement was needed for adult students as adults are attempting to balance their educational interactions with external factors such as family and work.

Positionality Statement

Qualitative research empowers participants to share their experiences, stories, and views; the researcher is the link to sharing the story and providing the analysis (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, it is important for the researcher to disclose their position regarding the research. According to Creswell (2013) and LeVasseur (2003), the researcher shares how their personal position and understanding will be introduced into the study. As recommended by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), the positionality statement and autobiographical information below includes my personal experiences and concerns relevant to the study.

I am passionate about providing opportunities and resources for adult learners to be successful. I also believe that adult learners need a voice to advocate on their behalf to be

successful students. My experience as dean of an instructional site for the university's School of Continuing Studies allows me to observe firsthand the needs of adult learners as they work to overcome obstacles and succeed as students. As an adult graduate student, I can relate to the obstacles that many nontraditional students face on the path to degree completion. Through this research, it was my hope to learn more about the experiences of adult learners regarding blended learning and hybrid classes and how this information can be used to improve options for students.

My position with regard to blended learning and hybrid courses is one of interest based on my work with adult students and my own experiences as an adult learner. My first doctoral level course, taken more than six years ago at another institution, was offered as an online course. My previous experience with technology as a platform for learning was quite limited and therefore made me anxious about taking an online course. The doctoral course was an education course designed to introduce educators to e-learning and technology. This online course experience created an interest on my part for the need to explore and expand course delivery methods, especially for nontraditional students.

Working with adult nontraditional learners has exposed me to the issues they experience when returning to college. I have observed that adult students are interested in options to help them complete their degrees, such as online learning. However, I have also heard adult students express their concerns that they are not comfortable with online instruction. Blended learning and the use of hybrid classes is an instructional option that combines both face-to-face learning with online learning. I was interested in exploring the experiences and perceptions adult students had regarding hybrid classes in order to improve the experiences and outcomes for students.

Autobiographical Information

As the primary researcher of this study, I believe it is important to disclose autobiographical information relevant to my interest in this study. While working on my undergraduate degree in education, I was a traditional student during my freshman and sophomore years. However, I was a nontraditional student during my junior and senior years in my undergraduate studies because I was married and working part-time while finishing my education. During the time I worked on both my undergraduate and master's degrees, options for course delivery were very limited, so as an adult learner I attended classes in the conventional manner and received face-to-face instruction. Attending college as an adult student, while working and raising a family, gave me a keen sense of the obstacles facing adult learners and the need for other options to complete a degree.

My professional experience in education spans over 30 years in the field. Since 2003, I have been working in higher education with both traditional and nontraditional student populations. The passion I have for helping students have access to an education and the resources and options for successful degree completion provide the foundation that motivated me to explore how adult student perceptions of hybrid classes can be used to improve course content, design, and delivery.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout the research process I exercised ethical considerations. For example, I respected participants and disclosed the purpose of the study to them. Interview questions were not leading, and I provided results for participants to review. I made arrangements to conduct the second interview by phone, Skype, or in person if that was their preference.

Prior to conducting the study, I gained approval from The University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board as well as approval from the selected research site's Institutional Review Board. I obtained permission from individual participants through an informed consent form. The informed consent form disclosed the purpose of the study and the voluntary nature of the study. Informed consent also notified participants that they would not be exposed to any undue risk (Creswell, 2013). These items were also reiterated at the onset of the interview sessions.

Protection of the data and participant privacy was important to insuring an ethical process. As the researcher, I maintained all recorded interviews on a digital device that was password protected. All written interview notes and observations were organized, stored, and protected digitally on my laptop which is password protected. Additionally, the data files were located on a storage device that was regularly backed up and kept in a safe belonging to me.

Limitations

At the time of this research, I was employed by the same institution where the nontraditional adult students attended and where the study was conducted. However, I did not teach at this university, nor was I the dean of the Empire instructional site. I was, however, the dean at the Mosaic instructional site. Participants were aware of my role at the institution. In full disclosure, there is a degree of bias and subjectivity on my part as a result of my affiliation with the university as well as my own professional and personal background in higher education.

Quality Assurance

I address quality assurance, or validity, from the perspective of authenticity (Creswell, 2013). This can be framed within the balance of views and awareness by participants and the researcher (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). The research process, therefore, includes

discovery, reflection, discourse, and maintenance of an ethical relationship by giving voice to the participants (Lincoln et al., 2011).

First, I disclosed and clarified any researcher bias that existed at the outset of my research. Bias is defined as “a preconception about a thing, person, or group” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 70). Identifying researcher bias reduces the possibility that it will intentionally influence the research. Personal stance is not the same as bias because stance reflects deeply held beliefs and attitudes about what is important and could positively influence the researcher. For example, my personal stance reflects my beliefs and position toward the issue of improved opportunities to engage adult students in the co-construction of their learning. Second, I recognized the importance of reflexivity throughout the study. Qualitative studies use reflexivity to demonstrate respect for the participants through self-disclosure of information about the researcher’s interest and stance (Creswell, 2013). Reflexivity was important because of my position of employment with the institution in which the study was conducted. My work certainly prompted my interest in exploring what students were experiencing in the hybrid class format. As the researcher, my background with the subject of the study shaped the method I considered most appropriate for exploration. Third, I reviewed the study with participants as a form of verification so they could check for accuracy.

As part of the analysis process, and to check for validity, I looked for patterns, themes, and categories as a result of coding. There were occasions when participants shared experiences that were part of their involvement in higher education but which were not related to the study questions. I allowed individuals to share these experiences as I perceived this to be helpful to them as a means of addressing their concerns regarding adult learning in higher education. My goal was to have student interviews guide the research. I consider knowledge as socially

constructed, and through the interview process it was evident that interactions between the student and researcher allowed knowledge and understanding to develop.

Reciprocity, whereby I give back to the participants of the study, is important. Participants provided their time to aid completion of this research project; therefore, it was important that I provide them with respect for their time and personal information. I sent information with the results of the study to participants as printed copies and indicated that I was also available to meet with them to discuss the results (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

In summary, with adult students becoming the fastest growing student population in the nation, colleges and universities can meet the needs of students and the needs of institutions by utilizing innovative technology to reach students beyond the borders of brick and mortar campus structures. By examining the factors associated with student satisfaction and student persistence toward degree completion, educators can make higher education accessible and attainable to a wider student population.

Blended learning combines the benefits of technology with face-to-face academic instruction through hybrid course design. In a review of previous studies regarding blended learning and hybrid courses, data have emerged regarding the hybrid course design, the purpose of implementing blended learning, and the benefits of blended learning and hybrid courses. However, little research is available that explores the perceptions of nontraditional undergraduate adult students toward blended learning using hybrid courses. Using frameworks and models for adult learning (Knowles, 1978) and student engagement (Kuh, 2009), this research explored the unique student population of nontraditional adult students and their perceptions of blended learning.

In conclusion, this study explored the perceptions and experiences of undergraduate adult learners regarding blended learning which employed hybrid course design to determine how perceptions influenced their learning and level of engagement. Study findings will be used to identify common elements related to: (1) understanding hybrid learning as a unique educational method, (2) improving the design of hybrid courses, and (3) promoting academic engagement for undergraduate adult students.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Introduction

The purpose of this case study was to explore the perceptions of undergraduate adult students at a private university in the South about their instructional experiences with hybrid courses. Specifically, this study explored how adult learners perceived engagement in their classes that used a hybrid format. As a result, this study revealed how adult students defined engagement and placed value on student engagement in their learning experiences. This study also revealed what conditions influenced students to enroll in hybrid classes and whether they would continue to take hybrid courses. This study exposed many of the challenges that adult students face with taking college classes. It also identified their perceptions of the roles that instructors, students, and the institution play and how these roles influenced the overall experience in a hybrid class.

For this study, I interviewed 20 students. Each of the first set of interviews took place at the instructional site where students attended classes. The second set of interviews was conducted by phone for the Empire students, and all but two of the Mosaic students opted for in-person interviews. The other two students from the Mosaic site requested a phone interview.

All of the participants attended the same university, but eight of the students were enrolled at the Empire instructional site while 12 were enrolled at the Mosaic instructional site. All of the participants were undergraduate adult students who were 25 years of age or older.

There were eight male students and 12 female students. Purely by coincidence, there were four male students from each campus site. There were four female students from the Empire site and eight female students from the Mosaic site.

All of the participants had been enrolled or were currently enrolled in at least one hybrid class and employed either full-time or part-time while taking at least two classes per semester. One student was a recent graduate but had been working full-time while attending as a student. Of the 20 participants, 17 said they would take hybrid classes again, two said they probably would not, and one said she was not sure because it was too early in her college experience to make that determination.

Table 2 provides information about participants regarding their campus location, the number of hybrid classes they had taken to date, how they rated their overall experience in hybrid classes, and whether or not they had an orientation session prior to taking hybrid classes.

Table 2
Participant Information

Student	Gender	No. of Hybrid Classes	Site	Overall Experience	Had Orientation
Rich	Male	3	Empire	F	N
Cheryl	Female	1	Empire	N	N
Crissie	Female	2	Empire	G	S
Roberto	Male	1	Empire	G	S
Cameron	Male	1	Empire	G	S
Allen	Male	1	Empire	G	S
Valerie	Female	2	Mosaic	E	Y
Robin	Male	3	Mosaic	G	Y
Karyn	Female	3	Mosaic	F	Y
Charles	Male	2	Mosaic	E	Y
Tamara	Female	1	Empire	E	Y
Nillie	Female	1	Empire	E	Y
Addy	Female	1	Mosaic	G	Y
Alaine	Female	2	Mosaic	F/P ^a	Y/N ^b
Bailee	Female	4	Mosaic	E	Y
Anatasia	Female	3	Mosaic	E	Y
Daniel	Male	6	Mosaic	G ^c	S
Federica	Female	2	Mosaic	G	S
Dallas	Male	1	Mosaic	E	Y
Jacinda	Female	5	Mosaic	E	Y

Notes. E = Excellent; G = Good; F = Fair; P = Poor; N = No Opinion; S = Some, but not enough; N= No; Y= Yes

a = Student took two hybrid classes, each class was given a different overall experience rating.

b = Student took two hybrid classes; one instructor provided orientation and the other did not.

c = Student took multiple hybrid courses over several years and includes hybrid experience at another institution.

Each interview began with first determining how students defined hybrid classes and learning. Nearly all of the participants referred to hybrid classes as a combination of face-to-face learning, or onsite classes, combined with online classes. Some participants included statements that expounded upon this format and included descriptions of the frequency that classes met and additional details about how the hybrid class was formatted. For example, Rich defined hybrid

classes as having “direct contact with the instructor once a week or once every other week.” He also added, “Meeting online in the hybrid [class] is collaborative with a team.” His experience with the hybrid format included team assignments and collaboration.

Karyn described a hybrid class as a means for students to work at their own pace some of the time since face-to-face class sessions were every other week. In describing the hybrid class format, Daniel noted that a student could “cover a broad spectrum of ground” by enrolling in two hybrid classes that met on the same day of the week but had alternating schedules. This, he said, would allow a student to accomplish two classes in the same amount of time as taking one class. Cameron’s definition of a hybrid class was simply “One week the students met in class and the next week they participated in class via the Internet.”

As part of the interview protocol, but also as a means to get to know the participants and learn about their full experiences with hybrid courses, I asked students how each student was first introduced to hybrid classes. A majority of students from the Empire site described an initial lack of understanding regarding the concept and the hybrid format. The majority of students from the Mosaic site, on the other hand, said their academic advisor had introduced them to the hybrid class format.

Nine out of the 12 Mosaic students said their academic advisor explained the hybrid class format in detail before they made a decision to enroll in the class. For the students from the Empire site, three learned about it when looking at course offerings online; two walked into the first class session and heard about it from the instructor as part of the course introduction. Three received a generic email from their advisor with general information. For the students from the Mosaic site, eight of the students learned about the hybrid course offerings from their academic advisor, three saw it listed when looking at the course schedule online, and one received a

recommendation for it from another student and then spoke to the advisor for further information.

Several students indicated that their interest in participating in this study was based on their desire to see hybrid classes improved. Others volunteered that they thought the concept was good and wanted to promote the need for more hybrid class options. There were a number of students who were preparing to graduate who expressed gratitude for the hybrid classes because they believed the courses they took enabled them to stay on track and graduate on time. A few students said they were impressed that someone (the researcher) cared to learn about their experiences, thoughts, and opinions; they were eager to participate and make a contribution to the research literature.

Themes

During the transcription process, I began to identify codes. Once I had coded for each question, I reviewed and determined overall themes. In general terms, the themes that emerged were: format of hybrid classes; student engagement; challenges; roles of student, faculty, and institution; and sense of security.

Specifically, the following five major themes developed as the result of the data analysis, and each one is explored in further detail in the following narrative:

1. Perceived values by students regarding the hybrid format.
2. Student engagement in hybrid classes.
3. Emotions associated with the challenges of being a nontraditional student.
4. Roles that influenced the experiences of students in hybrid classes.
5. Perceived security and confidence related to the hybrid class format.

Perceived Values by Students Regarding the Hybrid Format

Convenience, flexibility, and balancing schedules. Students at both instructional sites affirmed the need for new options regarding course delivery to meet the challenges faced by

adult learners. Participants in this study universally expressed the value of the hybrid format in terms of convenience and flexibility afforded to them. Frederica has a small business that she runs from her home. She said that the hybrid class was helpful because it allowed her to take care of her three children and manage her own business from home. Taking a hybrid class offered her the necessary convenience to manage both family and work responsibilities.

Some participants identified convenience and flexibility as reasons they had selected online courses in the past. Some students said they did not like the online class format because it felt impersonal, but the benefit gained from the online format in terms of convenience outweighed any drawback as they attempted to juggle their personal schedules. Students from the Mosaic site were intrigued by the hybrid design because it met their need for convenience and also provided opportunities for face-to-face instructional time onsite. Daniel explained his perspective based on his past experiences, “I can’t do straight online classes. I have to attend some classes. I have to have some time in the classroom because I’m not disciplined enough for all online. Plus, face-to-face time allows you to develop relationships.”

Anastasia shared another perspective regarding the value of the hybrid format. She said that hybrid classes “are perfect” because a student can take two different hybrid classes on the same night because the face-to-face sessions are on alternating weeks. Anastasia expressed satisfaction that she could be on campus one night a week to attend two classes. The format allowed her to attend class once a week while taking her other class online and then alternate the schedule the following week. This hybrid format allowed her complete two classes which she said was more efficient and helped her balance her schedule.

Family time. One area that demands a great deal of time and attention for adult students is the time they desire to dedicate to their families. In describing a hybrid class Dallas said, “You

have the opportunity to spend more time with family, even though you have the online portion to do.” Dallas explained that meeting every other week for the online portion of class was a positive because it provided some flexibility with student schedules, especially if they do not take another hybrid class on the same night. Dallas noted that spending time with family can give adult students a sense of balance in their lives. From his perspective, Dallas articulated that he was more successful with his course work when he felt there was a balance in his life between family time and study time.

Work schedules. Another area that demands time of nontraditional students is related to their work schedules. Robin described the hybrid class format as one that “Helps your schedule if you are working and going to school.” Robin explained that the format allowed for “an extra day gained every other week” and that helped with his job schedule. He also used the online week, the week when he was not on campus, to catch up on his school studies in other classes. Likewise, Tamara described the hybrid format as one that helps students to maintain their interest and focus in the class because the convenience helps working adults to balance their schedules better.

Charles said he wished all of his classes were hybrid classes because he liked the face-to-face time balanced with online classes. He explained that the format helped him not to rush from work to class on the weeks he had the online portion of class. He had taken purely online classes in the past but said they were lacking in terms of developing a personal connection with his classmates. Another student, Jacinda, likened the flexibility due to format to greater freedom. She said, “It gives more leeway for those students who have crazy schedules. For working people it gives them freedom.”

Transportation and travel time. Students from the Empire campus related stories about traveling great distances to campus or dealing with major traffic issues. Several students, such as Crissie, provided positive comments regarding the hybrid format as a more suitable option for working adults who also enjoyed face-to-face interactions with peers but favored the flexibility of the online format. Crissie took a hybrid class that met on campus every other Saturday morning. As a working mom, she noted that this option provided a good combination of face-to-face and online formats.

Tamara also took a hybrid course that met on campus every other Saturday morning. She observed that the traffic was not as bad on the weekend and the class environment was a little more relaxed. She suggested that she might not want to take a conventional face-to-face class that met every Saturday, but meeting every other week was not so bad and helped her manage her overall schedule.

Two students from the Empire site, Cheryl and Nillie, both traveled over 40 miles each way to class. They each expressed gratitude for the hybrid format, which allowed them to attend class online every other week. Bailee, from the Mosaic site, traveled 50 miles to and from campus to attend classes. She has a full-time job and a family and proposed that more hybrid class offerings are needed to assist her and other students in similar situations. She explained that travel time to and from campus was time she wished she could have spent with family or at home working on her class assignments.

Alaine, however, preferred to be on campus in face-to-face classes. As a single person with a full-time job, Alaine did not care about the distance to travel to class. She was of the opinion that hybrid classes were helpful if a student needed to double-up and take two classes on one night, but she believed the benefit of interactions amongst peers in a face-to-face setting was

far greater. When the conversation shifted to synchronous online courses, Alaine was baffled why anyone would want to take a course formatted in which everyone met online at the same time. Her question was, “Then why doesn’t everyone just come to campus to meet?” Once she understood that students might be participating from a distance and that they were hoping to have as close to a face-to-face classroom experience as possible, she said she understood but still wondered why they simply would not seek a local institution. For Alaine, being physically present on campus to interact with others was as significant as the course content.

Student Engagement in Hybrid Classes

Engagement defined. In an effort to best understand participant perceptions of engagement, I asked individuals to explain or define their understanding of student engagement. Study participants explained engagement in terms of interactions with professors and peers, communication, and other connections or relationships with the professor and class members. All three characteristics were slightly different but participants perceived them as interconnected and necessary components for student engagement. Participants also commented on the necessity of these characteristics for engagement to improve the likelihood of nontraditional students succeeding and achieving degree completion.

Interactions with professors were referred to in terms of course content and the orientation methods used to prepare students for the course. Students like Anastasia and Dallas described their experiences with professors who provided very detailed and thorough orientation sessions. These students suggested that effort on the part of the professor was the first step to creating a relationship of trust and respect between instructor and student. For adult students who may feel insecure about returning to college, this type of interaction and relationship with a professor was perceived as engaging and positive.

Study participants also perceived engagement when the professor was accessible and available to discuss questions about the course content. This was especially important to students during the online portion of the course. One of the reasons that Addy said she preferred face-to-face classes was based on the immediate feedback and communication she experienced in that format. However, she did have one professor for a hybrid course whom she said was an excellent teacher and facilitator. In this situation, she said she felt engaged throughout the course. However, she also described one professor who failed to communicate regularly and was not well-prepared for the online portion of the hybrid course.

Interaction with peers was discussed in terms of collaboration that occurred for group projects and class assignments. Participants also described peer interactions that occurred over a cup of coffee in the student lounge during a class break or online through discussion boards. Federica emphasized that the face-to-face class time enabled students to feel comfortable opening up with one another and sharing in-depth thoughts and conversations during the online portion. She observed that the tone was better understood since students had been together in person.

Communication was referred to as both dialogue and response time from instructors and classmates. These were areas of importance for students. Many students expressed the value of participation by all classmates, particularly during the online portion, in order for it to be a truly engaging experience. Students, such as Dallas, wanted to receive feedback and input from both his classmates and professors.

He noted that when he did not receive feedback from classmates, the discussion would fizzle out. This, he said, was disappointing. Dallas said that he especially enjoyed class

discussions that were ongoing—even when they transitioned from the online discussion boards to the following week during a face-to-face discussion in the classroom.

According to these students, peer connections and relationships helped them develop a sense of security which they perceived as important to engaging in the class and with others. For example, Valerie shared stories about the students in her class forming a bond with each other because they came to know each other through their face-to-face class time. She noted that the bond was strengthened through in-depth dialogue they shared during the online portion of class. According to Valerie, students seemed to know one another better as a result of the hybrid class experience. For her personally, she said she experienced a new level of trust and security with her teachers and classmates. She expressed a hope that more hybrid classes would be offered in the future.

Figure 2 illustrates the overlapping relationship between the key aspects of interaction, communication, and connection that participants expressed as components that defined student engagement for adult learners.

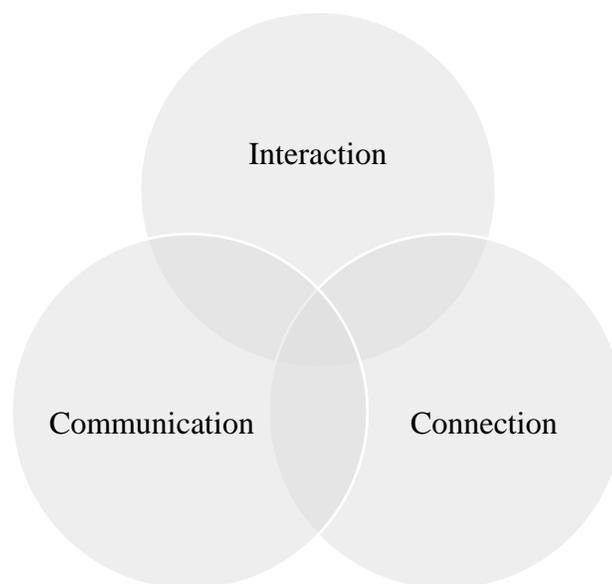


Figure 2. Key aspects of adult learner perceptions of student engagement.

Allen attributed engagement in the hybrid course to the professor's requirement of participation; a percentage of the overall grade was based on participation. He spoke positively about this required participation. Robin and Dallas said that requiring participation and structuring the course so that participation was mandatory is important; otherwise, adult students might have a tendency to do the minimum level of required work and participate at low levels.

Rich said, "Interaction happens when there are [*sic*] a manageable number of students in the course." He explained that he would rather pay more for a course and have fewer students in the class in order to receive a quality learning experience. From his perspective, the hybrid class format can facilitate student engagement when the instructor utilizes resources to orchestrate engagement. The example he gave was one in which an instructor utilized technology to provide visual and real-time interactions. Like other study participants, Rich observed that students in the course contribute to engagement through their level of participation.

Some students, like Cheryl, found the most engaging part of the hybrid course to be face-to-face sessions. Cheryl suggested that face-to-face class time enabled students and the instructor to develop a relationship that provided the foundation needed to interact and communicate during the online portion of the hybrid class. Crissie shared a similar perspective and added that the value of the online portion of the hybrid class provided time for reflective thought and responses to discussion questions. Crissie explained that time for in-depth reflection was not always available in classes that were entirely face-to-face. The format of the hybrid class, however, helped to facilitate this type of thinking and communication.

For Roberto, engagement was about making the content interesting and something in which students could relate. Engagement also involved creating a learning environment where students wanted to be active participants. Roberto contended that the responsibility for

developing a course which facilitated student engagement rested with the instructor. Cameron shared a similar view based on a negative class experience. He said that student engagement was lacking in his hybrid class because the instructor did not seem well-prepared for the online portion of the course. Students had assignments but not much interaction with one another online. Cameron stated, “When the class was together face-to-face, the instructor made all of that happen through the discussion we had.” During the online portion of class, however, students were teaching themselves and navigating through the system on their own.

Challenges related to engagement in a hybrid course. Research supports the need for college students to experience engagement. However, adult nontraditional students do not always have the time and resources to experience student engagement in the same way as traditional-age students. As previously mentioned, engagement for study participants was defined and described as participation, communication, and relationships. According to Rich, if students do not participate in the online portion of the class then the level of engagement is compromised because “students help each other through the dialogue and working things out.”

Students like Crissie talked about the challenges of engagement based on how the instructor designed the course. Specifically, Crissie said the instructor “crammed more into the face-to-face class than the online portion.” With more preparation from the instructor, Crissie suggested the hybrid format would be a good option. Roberto also shared his experience with hybrid courses included one professor who was very structured and organized. This instructor, however, did not include many opportunities for students to interact with one another. According to Roberto, the course was taught like a lecture course which he said hindered student engagement.

Impact of orientation on engagement. Overall, students from both instructional sites communicated that more time should have been devoted to a more thorough orientation of hybrid classes. Two students from the Empire site said they had an orientation that prepared them for the hybrid classes. Two other students from the Empire site said they had no orientation, and the remaining four students from Empire said they had some orientation but not enough.

For most students, “some orientation” meant the instructor did not incorporate how to use the technology for the course into the orientation session and that left students feeling ill-prepared. It also meant that students felt “isolated,” as described by Alaine, because they did not know if they personally lacked an understanding or if the entire class felt that way. For example, Cheryl said:

Um, I think that there should be more of an orientation...some kind of an orientation night. I think it would help us...someone like me who is new to being back in school...to get a better understanding of the structure and expectations. And it would help to make me feel like the teacher was more approachable. She has been great to respond but I might have approached her a lot sooner.

Roberto’s experience was challenging because he did not have an orientation session with the hybrid format. He said he had to learn how to maneuver through the software platform and hybrid format on his own. Roberto stated:

For an adult student who is working full-time, there is not enough time to figure all of this stuff out on your own. This is something I wish the institution and the professor had prepared students for through an orientation.

Valerie, who expressed initial apprehension about taking a hybrid class, said that the orientation session helped students understand the format and expectations of the course.

According to Valerie, the orientation session made her feel secure that she would have interaction and support from her classmates. Valerie suggested that orientation sessions might need to be a little longer with more opportunities for question and answer sessions.

Students from the Mosaic site had largely positive comments about the orientation sessions; however, they would have preferred to have more time during the orientation for question and answer time with the instructor and some practice experiences with the software platform to make sure they were comfortable using it prior to the beginning of the course.

Benefits of engagement. Similar to traditional students, the benefits of student engagement with nontraditional students include persistence and completion. Study participants referred to engagement and what it meant to them as one of the conditions that helped them continue in their educational pursuit. Student engagement for these participants was closely connected to their relationships with peers and instructors. As Charles said, “It’s the relationships...it’s the thing that helps me to keep plugging along.” Valerie expressed the benefits of student engagement with great emotion when she spoke. She said, “The relationship with my peers is what helped me to succeed and feel confident.”

Allen’s experience with a hybrid class was positive. He talked about the environment and relationships that were facilitated by the instructor of the course. Allen noted that his professor spent the first night of class explaining the format and how the class would be organized. Allen said that he enjoyed the hybrid class because there was “opportunity for the class to be more personal and cozy. We all got to know each other and really had fun asking questions and learning.”

According to Allen, students had a great dialogue online which he suggested was due in part to the relaxed face-to-face class time they shared. He said that students were comfortable

with each other and this contributed to meaningful, in-depth discussions online. Allen also shared that the instructor provided a live stream that was positively received by students and enhanced the course.

Robin described the value of the hybrid format related to student engagement in terms of time in which the class was together face-to-face. Like other students, he also suggested that students got to better know one another when they experienced some face time together; this, he said, contributed to a more engaging experience.

Robin noted the same dynamic regarding face-to-face time with the instructor. According to Robin, face-to-face time helped foster a sense of comfort and even made the online experience more comfortable. Robin expressed his own need for interaction and engagement as a means to follow through with assignments and feel accountable to the instructor. Similarly, Daniel mentioned the value of being engaged through the hybrid format and the built-in accountability by attending face-to-face classes every other week.

Valerie's student engagement experiences with the hybrid class made her feel more secure than had she taken a purely online class. She attributed her self-confidence to the relationships and interactions with her classmates. Valerie described the hybrid format as better than the conventional face-to-face class format because students were more engaged through online discussions. She said the face-to-face time in the hybrid class allowed students to develop relationships, but the online portion facilitated "deep" conversations among students. Valerie seemed quite passionate about the topic when sharing her perceptions. Specifically, she posited that the hybrid format positively encouraged student engagement through the development of a "sense of community" with class members.

Frederica explained her views of the benefits of student engagement with one word: “enlightened”. She said that engagement means sharing ideas and being enlightened to new ideas through class discussions. She proposed that meeting face-to-face in class allowed students to develop a relationship so that they would open up and share their ideas through online discussions. Frederica further elaborated by saying “having face-to-face time helps you to understand others by putting a name and a face together so you can understand the tone of what’s being said.”

Bailee said, “Online classes feel like they don’t have the human connection but the hybrid [class] helps to make it feel that there is a human connection. You know the person behind the computer and the keyboard.” Bailee also observed that she does not do well in strictly online classes, but that the format of hybrid classes made her feel comfortable because there are opportunities to get to know her professors and classmates.

Some of the students shared positive experiences with online classes they had taken in the past. However, they all commented that an advantage with the hybrid format was the ability to better understand their classmates. As Tamara said, “Having spent time together in class made it easier to read and understand the comments of students when they were online—you know their voice better.”

In summary, academic and social interaction through group work and discussions enabled students to connect to one another to develop relationships. This, in turn, increased their level of persistence.

Emotions Associated with the Challenges of Being a Nontraditional Student

The need for respect. In the classroom learning environment, one of the characteristics desired by adult students is to be respected. In her interviews for this study, Karyn shared her

hopes regarding the hybrid class format. Karyn's previous experience with onsite, face-to-face classes provided little flexibility; she hoped her hybrid class would be more flexible in order to meet job and family obligations.

She explained that she had to be out of town for several weeks during her hybrid class due to her mother's illness. During this time, she had difficulty with Internet accessibility so her attendance in the online portion was disrupted. She said she was prepared for her grade to suffer due to her physical absence from the face-to-face classes. However, she was taking a hybrid class that required frequent discussion postings. Her lack of participation put her behind and negatively affected her grade. Karyn's perspective was that there needed to be more respect given to the schedules of adult students and the situations they encounter as adults. As Karyn relayed her experience during the interview, it was evident that her frustrations and emotions were still fresh and unresolved.

Expectations. Through the interview process, participants revealed their personal expectations related to their education. For example, Cheryl was in her first semester as an adult college student, and she said she was feeling anxious about taking classes and her likelihood of success. She anticipated and expected the hybrid class to offer sufficient student-teacher interaction. She conveyed satisfaction with the level of "communication and facilitation by faculty during the onsite class instruction time," noting that it "was very good and it helped students to be successful." However, she also expressed disappointment "by the lack of involvement from the instructor during the online portion." For example, she said, "We needed more interaction—even once a week we needed the teacher to be on the discussion board." Nevertheless, Cheryl noted that she found the student-to-student interaction to be meaningful and helpful.

Allen said he had an understanding of the format when he enrolled in the hybrid course, but did not know what to expect in terms of the course load. He expected to have more information available about the standards and requirements by the instructor and expressed initial frustration. However, the class was so relaxed that he decided not to let it bother him.

Tamara noted that her expectations were exceeded by the hybrid course format. Tamara said she was pleased by the organization of the course and the activities that encouraged interaction among students and faculty. Her course was structured in a synchronous format so she did not have the level of flexibility that many students identified as a positive condition with online and hybrid class formats. However, she said that she was aware of the structure prior to enrolling in the course and therefore did not perceive this to be a disadvantage.

Rich had enrolled in hybrid classes at different institutions over the past few years, so he had course expectations based on previous experiences. He described his most recent experience at the Empire site as leaving him somewhat frustrated by the lack of clearly identified course expectations. He perceived a lack of planning and organization on the part of the instructor for the online portion of class. Rich said there were no clear objectives regarding course content and format and mused about whether or not the institution had done due diligence regarding orientation and preparation for the instructor.

Positive emotions and experiences. Despite a few frustrating experiences shared by study participants, students' overall feelings regarding the hybrid format were quite positive. For example, Daniel said, "Due to work, it was a relief from pressure and stress to attend fewer nights on campus and still be able to take more classes." Roberto said the experience was positive because it met his need for taking the class while also providing more free time, or flexible time, during the weeks in which he had the online portion.

Tamara expressed appreciation for the instructor who encouraged participation. She described these interactions as “wide-open communication so that we were allowed to honestly say what we thought.” However, all but one of the students in Tamara’s class was female and all were nontraditional. She said she typically prefers a more diverse student population in her classes and hoped more hybrids would be offered in the future with greater representation from different student population groups.

Roles that Influence the Experience of the Hybrid Class

Role of the instructor. Students talked about their instructors in relation to their experiences with hybrid classes and the role of the instructor regarding student engagement. It was evident that students respected the expertise of their course instructors and apparent that students have expectations for instructors to hold students accountable in the areas of organization, teaching methodology, and communication. In describing the experience, Roberto said, “It depends on the teacher. Everything about the hybrid [class] really comes back to the teacher and organization.”

While students did not refer to teaching methods as pedagogy or andragogy, they essentially described these concepts. For instance, Rich said, “It’s about taking information and applying it to the real world. Make teaching and information ‘practical’. Make learning fun and enjoyable.” He described a number of experiences where he believed the instructors invested their time and resources to make learning practical and enjoyable and said that this was important for adult students in terms of creating a learning environment that encouraged student engagement.

According to Addy, instructor preparation correlated to student engagement in class. She said, “The teacher helps to make it that way [facilitate engagement] by being well-prepared.”

Abby also expressed the importance of meeting with her instructor face-to-face in the hybrid class every other week. She said that these in-class meetings helped to develop a “good relationship” as compared to purely online classes she took in which she found it difficult to feel the same kind of connection.

Allen said, “Some faculty members make assumptions that all students understand everything because ‘it’s on the syllabus.’ They shouldn’t do that. They need to explain everything and allow students to ask questions.” Additionally, Crystal noted that as an adult student in her first semester, instructors needed to be sensitive to students who were learning to navigate through the system for the first time. Crystal noted that there were times she wanted to ask questions, but she was not quite sure what to ask since the process of being a college student was new to her.

For some students, the instructor made an immediate difference regarding their perceptions prior to starting the class. For example, Bailee said:

I didn’t think I would like the class based on the syllabus. But when I went to class, the instructor was kind and personable and I felt he was approachable. It made me feel comfortable to email him with a question.

One of the most salient quotes regarding the role of the instructor came from Rich. He said that when the instructor made the learning applicable to life and work, it made him feel “valued as a learner.”

Study participants perceived a good relationship with their instructors as a form of engagement because it impacted their level of communication and interaction. Related to this sense of engagement was the perceived quality of preparation and organization by the instructor for the course. Overall, students had positive comments about the hybrid format when they

perceived the instructor was well-prepared and used methods of teaching that resonated with them.

Role of the student. Learning is affected when nontraditional adult students need to balance life's responsibilities, such as work and family, while also attending classes. Several students emphasized that hybrid classes seemed to be a better fit for students who were self-motivated and self-directed. Some students said it worked well for students who took initiative regarding their education.

For example, Charles expressed concern about students who enrolled in hybrid classes but had not had previous experience with online learning. He said that these students are at a disadvantage unless the instructor makes an intentional effort to help them become familiar with online learning. When I asked him to explain this further, he said he was thinking about a situation in one of his classes with a classmate who was very shy and introverted. This classmate was not familiar with the technology and was too timid to seek assistance. For Charles, this example was reflective of a student's learning style and personality.

In this study, student opinions were based on their observations of peers who seemed to thrive in hybrid classes as compared to those who struggled. Participants noted that some students struggled with time management and organizational skills—both of which they identified as important attributes for success in hybrid and online courses.

Anastasia shared her own personal learning style and characteristics which she believed allowed her to be successful in the hybrid classes she had completed. She identified herself as a highly motivated person, a self-starter. Anastasia said that she took responsibility for learning information and viewed the instructor as the expert who guided and facilitated students through the learning process. Anastasia indicated that she used all of the resources available to her

through the learning management system, such as calendars and organizers, to feel a sense of control over the process. She also noted that not all nontraditional students want to experience a high level of engagement and interaction with other students. With so many other responsibilities in life, she suggested that some students might prefer to be independent of others. However, she posited that the best learning experiences resulted from interactions with diverse groups of peers and instructors.

When asked to describe the best hybrid learning experiences to date, many of the participants identified receiving support from their peers as being valuable and positive. Valerie said, “The support and interaction from the students...from the others was very important and [this] to me was engagement.” Several students commented that face-to-face time was important for building these initial relationships. The depth of their discussions during the online portion of the class and their group assignments enabled them to feel more closely connected to one another.

Participants also observed that when students in a class do not participate to the fullest, everyone in the class suffers. Robin, who admitted that he has had trouble with organizational skills and that his job kept him busy while taking his hybrid class, said he could not always spend as much time on the discussion boards as his instructor and classmates would have liked. He suggested that this was the “reality” for many nontraditional students, and each person manages what works for them.

Students repeatedly expressed the value of the connections they had with their classmates through face-to-face interactions prior to communicating with one another online. Allen summarized it in the following way:

The hybrid concept is positive. I have the ability to do [online] assignments on my own time and in my own space. I can “see” the person and know them so that when I see their posts, I understand them and what they are saying. We feel a connection that way.

Role of technology. Software programs have literally enhanced online learning so that virtual “teaching presence” can mimic the brick and mortar classroom learning experience. Not all institutions of higher learning are able to capitalize on the full capabilities of technological programs, but many, like the sites in this study, continue to expand their use of technology to improve educational outcomes and provide greater access to higher education.

Study participants expressed an interest in using technology for instruction because they are comfortable with it and use it often at work and home. For this study, participants described the use of technology in multiple ways. Some students found the available technology to be helpful, especially when professors demonstrated how the hybrid class would be structured and how to use the learning management system effectively. Other students suggested that the current technology was not fully maximized but should have been in order to improve the hybrid experience.

For example, Rich was currently in a hybrid class that used technology to conduct the class as a video conference. He explained that students in the class have the option to use the video conference, and most of them do. He observed that students tended to enjoy this technology option and found it helpful as it allowed students to conference in “real-time” and see each other.

Cameron recommended that technology be used to provide additional resources for students. He suggested creating videos of course content and delivery to help students who wanted to review the content. Cameron said he was aware that some courses at other colleges

were taught this way, but he had not experienced it at this institution. Cameron self-identified as a visual learner and noted that visual learners would benefit from this type of resource. He indicated that PowerPoint slides and notes are helpful but expressed a belief that actually viewing or reviewing a professor's lecture or demonstration would be equally or more advantageous to the learner.

Dallas made the observation that students need to be fully aware and prepared for the technology needed to participate in hybrid and online classes. He shared his concern regarding a fellow student, who was older than the other students, and how she struggled with adapting to the technology required for the hybrid course. Dallas said he sensed her frustration and questioned whether or not the hybrid format was a good fit for the skill level of this student.

On the one hand, he identified other older students who were taking hybrid and online classes and acknowledged that they were able to learn the technologies quickly and succeed in the courses. Charles proudly stated "the hybrid classes pushed me to learn about computers and available technology. I found that I could use YouTube as a resource."

Role of institutional leaders. Institutional leaders recognized the need to address challenges experienced by the nontraditional adult students attending the sites in this study. According to some of the participants in the study, areas of improvement by the institution include further training and development for faculty in the area of hybrid and online course delivery. Institutional leaders have a vested interest in providing and improving hybrid classes to demonstrate their commitment to student access and success.

For example, Cameron said, "The University shouldn't assume that instructors know how to do the hybrid [model of instruction]. And not everybody likes the technology part." Similarly,

Roberto said, “The school needs to make sure the instructor understands how the hybrid concept works and that the instructor is well prepared.”

Alaine took two hybrid classes during the same semester and had two very different experiences. In one course, Alaine had an instructor who was organized, well-prepared, and utilized the learning management system to the fullest. The other instructor seemed to struggle to adapt to the online portion of the class, specifically the technology. Alaine expressed frustration with these different experiences and questioned why two instructors seemed to function at opposite ends of the spectrum even though they both taught at the same site. Alaine expressed the belief that both instructors would have had the same training and preparation to teach hybrid courses. As a result of her experiences, Alaine said she would avoid hybrid classes in the future.

In summary, institutional support was viewed by study participants as necessary for both student success and quality programs. Institutional leaders are responsible for the value and excellence of education. Students expressed the importance of providing both faculty and students with training and an array of resources and services.

Perceived Security and Confidence Related to Hybrid Format

Students openly discussed their stories about returning to college and being nontraditional students. Most of the participants expressed initial fears and concerns about starting or re-entering college. Several study participants noted that their levels of security and confidence increased as a result of the hybrid format. For example, Valerie said:

The hybrid [class] gave [us] a better opportunity to get to know each other—better than just the regular classroom. We were sharing information and thoughts better with one another. There were also more opportunities to perform [tasks] together because we chose partners. There was more contact online and in person with the hybrid [format]. It built

unity, and students helped each other with strengths and weaknesses. It improved my level of confidence.

Bailee suggested that hybrid classes could serve as a bridge for students to take purely online courses. In this way, hybrid courses would prepare students for learning through the use of technology and build their self-confidence. Bailee stated:

I enjoy the hybrid classes and I think it is a smart way to offer classes to people who think they might want to take online classes but they don't feel comfortable doing that yet. They could do this format first to see if they like online.

For students like Allen, insecurities were heightened because they did not know enough about the hybrid format and course expectations prior to the first class meeting. Allen proposed that more information be available to students prior to enrolling in hybrid classes. He further suggested that instructors spend sufficient time reviewing the syllabus with students and answering questions rather than assuming that all students grasp the concept without discussion.

Conversely, students like Anastasia and Bailee praised the extent to which their professors provided preparation and orientation to the hybrid class environment. Both of these students said that the professors discussed in detail the format, teaching method and expectations, assessment, and resources available to students. By receiving this information up front, both Anastasia and Bailee expressed feelings of security and confidence in their abilities to succeed. Bailee said that she felt better about herself and more comfortable approaching her peers and professor.

Robin, a quiet student by his own admission, noted that his experiences with hybrid classes and face-to-face classes were similar because his previous face-to-face classes typically had small student enrollments. Robin indicated that small class sizes allowed him to feel secure

with his classmates and therefore comfortable sharing his thoughts. In fact, he described hybrid classes as a little more intimate than face-to-face classes due to having onsite class time and instructors who created an environment that developed acceptance and security.

In conclusion, the students in this study expressed the value of relationships related to establishing a sense of camaraderie and support. They also discussed the link between their sense of security and increased self-confidence. A number of students attributed this sense of security to their peers who demonstrated support for one another. Other students identified the instructor as the one who ultimately influenced the climate of the class which, in turn, impacted their sense of security and confidence. Overall, students expressed gratitude for the support they received from peers and instructors and attributed the relationships that developed to this support.

Summary

In summary, perceptions and observations from study participants provided insights of their understanding of hybrid classes and how they defined engagement. The changing demographics in higher education require educators to assess how well the needs of all students are met, particularly nontraditional adult students, and the critical role that student engagement plays in their achievement and retention. Study participants expressed their appreciation for hybrid classes that addressed their need for convenience and flexibility as compared to traditional class formats. These students also shared their desire for continued provision in the areas of resources and support services for students and faculty.

This case study explored the perceptions of undergraduate adult students regarding their instructional experiences with hybrid courses while attending a division of continuing studies within a private research university. Specifically, it explored how adult learners perceived engagement in their classes with the hybrid format. As a result of the study, five themes emerged.

The first theme was student perceptions of the value of the hybrid format. Due to the demands of life, adult nontraditional students greatly value time and convenience. Participants discussed the value of the hybrid class format in terms of helping them balance their work and family obligations.

For those who lived a significant distance from the instructional sites, students also discussed the amount of time they spent on traveling to and from campus. There were a few students who praised the convenience of the hybrid format because it allowed them to take more than one class on the same night of the week, thus reducing the number of nights per week they were on campus.

The second theme, student engagement in hybrid classes, was described as the interactions students had with professors and peers. Student engagement was also discussed in terms of communication between students and instructors. Both interaction and communication contributed to the relationships that developed and played key roles for students in terms of support they needed from one another and instructors. For some students, the relationships provided added motivation for persistence and graduation.

The third theme was an extension of the second theme; participants expressed their emotions regarding their role as a nontraditional adult learner. Participants focused on the challenges they faced, such as juggling schedules and adapting to being a student, as well as the positive emotions associated with overcoming obstacles and challenges. Participants acknowledged that the support they received contributed to positive emotions and feelings and a unique bond with one another.

The fourth theme highlighted the roles that influenced their experiences as students in hybrid classes. Study participants identified the roles of students, instructors, technology, and the

institution as significant to their hybrid class experiences. Students largely expressed the importance of having their peers participate in classes noting that a lack of participation reduced the quality of the learning experience.

Participants also acknowledged the important role of instructors in terms of course preparation and communication. Many students suggested that the role of the instructor was so important it would determine whether or not they would enroll in future hybrid classes. Students also perceived the role of the institution to be of great importance. Students relied on the institution to provide both high quality and quantity of resources to help them be successful in continuing their education. In terms of hybrid classes, students viewed the institution as the entity that was accountable for instructors being prepared to teach using the hybrid format. For these students, preparation included the necessary technology resources as well as training for faculty.

The fifth and final theme focused on student perceptions of security and confidence related to the hybrid class format. This theme seemed to encapsulate all of the other themes. Establishing a sense of security and confidence in their educational pursuit is a precursor to persistence. When adult students feel secure and confident in their learning experiences, they also feel motivated to complete the goal. Study participants expressed the importance of completing their educational pursuits and many attributed the following qualities to the hybrid format in helping them achieve their goals: convenience, positive interactions, communication, and significant relationships

In conclusion, study participants described their concept of hybrid learning and student engagement from an adult student perspective. Students also described their experiences and emotions related to the challenges they faced as adult students. For some, these experiences

influenced their decision to enroll in future hybrid classes. Participants emphasized the value of peer and instructor support and relationships, but noted that if communication or preparation were lacking, their hybrid and engagement experiences would be hindered.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this study, I explored undergraduate nontraditional adult learner perceptions of hybrid classes. Through participant interviews themes emerged related to the following areas: format of hybrid classes; student engagement; nontraditional student challenges; roles of student, faculty, and institutional leaders; and a sense of security. In this final chapter, I respond to the research questions, relate the information from participant interviews to previous research literature, and make suggestions for future research.

Technology has changed higher education and continues to create a paradigm shift with the Internet creating new options for accessing higher education (Essary, 2014). This research gave me the opportunity to spend extended time interviewing undergraduate nontraditional adult students one-on-one to learn about their perceptions regarding hybrid classes; students seemed eager to share their experiences, perceptions, and evaluations. Since all of the students were 25 years of age or older, they each had unique perspectives on attending college while also juggling multiple responsibilities and striving to complete a degree. These study participants were enrolled in a private university in the Southeastern United States; some attended classes at an instructional site near the main campus while others attended an instructional site 200 miles from the main campus.

According to Tinto (1987), social activities and interaction, commonly referred to as student engagement, among college students are key considerations for student persistence; this

is particularly true for traditional age students. Due to the demands of time on adult students, most nontraditional adult learners do not have opportunities or desires to engage in campus social activities and interactions. This was true for the students who participated in this study. Study participants were aware that personal demands placed limits on the amount of time they could spend on activities outside of work, family, and classes. Nevertheless, participants communicated a level of student engagement through their classes. They defined engagement in terms of communication, interaction, and relationships with their classmates and instructors.

Research Study Questions and Answers

In this final chapter, I address the main research question and the subset of questions listed below:

- How do nontraditional adult learners experience engagement in hybrid courses?

The subset of questions was as follows:

- How do adult students understand and define hybrid courses as a form of blended learning?
- How do adult students perceive engagement as a college student?
- How do adult students perceive student engagement in hybrid courses?
- What do adult learners perceive engages them in hybrid classes? Is it intellectual, social, content, or a combination of these?

How do nontraditional adult learners experience engagement in hybrid courses? In response to the overarching question regarding how nontraditional students experienced engagement in hybrid courses, I came to understand that nontraditional adult students perceived engagement as interaction and communication with their peers and instructors as well as the relationships they developed through these exchanges. The level of interaction that evolved through face-to-face class time and in-depth online dialogues helped students experience

engagement. Participants explained that their initial fears and insecurities about returning to college as nontraditional students diminished once they became engaged in their coursework and developed relationships with the instructor and other students. Through shared experiences and roles, such as tending to family and work responsibilities while attending college, students discussed personal growth including respect for varying points of view and personalities. Students suggest that this growth ultimately led to relationships and bonds of support. This finding supports previous studies that articulated the needs of adult students to create relationships and be treated as adults with respect to their life experiences (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001; Whitehead, 2015; Wyatt, 2011).

How do adult students understand and define hybrid courses as a form of blended learning? The nontraditional adult students in this study described hybrid classes as another option for learning—an option that combined face-to-face class time with online learning. Participants expressed positive comments regarding the hybrid model because most of them said they were comfortable with the use of technology for instruction. Several students voiced concerns about the lack of training provided by the institution for use with technology platforms, but they all said they were able to eventually maneuver through it. Students expressed appreciation for the hybrid format and hoped that additional resources would be in place to assist those who needed support.

Study participant comments aligned with previous research findings regarding technology. Additionally, students registered a greater sense of comfort with participating in online discussions as compared to face-to-face conversations (Young & Norgard, 2006). The majority of students said they felt more comfortable with their online discussions once they had

established a rapport with their instructors and peers. Some caveats, however, included instructor preparation and student learning styles to create a ‘match’ for the hybrid model of instruction.

How do adult students perceive engagement as a college student? Student engagement is a term often associated with traditional college-age students. The value of student engagement has been extolled for years as significant to predicting student persistence and success (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 2009, Tinto, 1987). Information regarding student engagement for nontraditional adult students is not as prevalent because adult learners have professional lives and typically do not have the same amount of time for or level of interest in engaging in college activities as traditional students. However, students in this study emphasized the importance of communication and interaction with their instructors and classmates. Interaction and communication were both conditions that led to a sense of connection to the institution, the course, and to others. Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the value of their interactions and relationships as a key component to pursuing their educational goals.

Another area that students addressed, which they linked to engagement, was learning styles. Participants associated learning styles and personal characteristics to levels of engagement. Based on student interviews personal characteristics tended to contribute more to engagement than learning styles. For example, students attributed characteristics such as self-motivation and extroversion to those who were more likely to engage in college as adult students. For those taking hybrid classes, students identified self-discipline, self-motivation, and strong organizational skills as traits they observed in peers who were engaged. The benefit of matching student learning styles and personal characteristics, such as self-discipline and motivation, with course delivery formats is supported in the research literature (Klein et al., 2006, Shieh, 2010).

How do adult students perceive engagement in hybrid classes? Student engagement in the hybrid class format was facilitated by instructors who designed courses to be interactive. Instructors who were well-prepared and coached students to be proficient with the technology and learning management system gained students' respect. Based on this level of preparation, students said they felt secure in the learning environment and empowered to assist one another. Study participants perceived this type of support as valuable for achieving individual success and further enhancing relationships among students.

Study participants discussed what engagement in college meant to them as adult students. Participants discussed the kinds of engagement they experienced in face-to-face classes, and the majority of them suggested that the hybrid format allowed them to reap the same benefits because hybrid courses incorporated the same elements of face-to-face time. These students said the hybrid format allowed them to experience the best of both face-to-face and online classes.

According to the experts, nontraditional students are willing to explore options for continuing their education through online or hybrid classes because they are seeking greater flexibility and convenience regarding their schedules (Essary, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). The benefits of convenience and flexibility meant a great deal to study participants. Many students also noted that the online portion of their hybrid classes facilitated deeper levels of thought, expression, and communication. These concepts, being enlightened through reflective thinking and having the mindset of inclusiveness, align with Mezirow's (1990) transformative learning theory which depicts learning as more inclusive, open, and reflective. Study participants identified this openness and time of reflection as valuable features of the hybrid format. Many also observed that the in-depth dialogue from the online portion was then transferred to discussions during the onsite portion of the class.

What do adult learners perceive engages them in hybrid classes? Is it intellectual, social, content, or a combination of these? Based on this research, participants perceived that the hybrid learning format allowed them to experience engagement in their hybrid classes through a combination of intellectual, social, and course content constructs. Intellectual engagement was produced through open dialogue. Students spoke about their own personal and intellectual growth as a result of listening to thoughts and ideas from classmates and then taking time to reflect and assimilate this new information.

Intellectual engagement was also stimulated by the assimilation of new knowledge with students' reservoir of life experiences. Knowles (1980) and Nelken (2009) maintained that knowledge among adult nontraditional students increases learning when they bring their own life experiences to the classroom. This finding supports andragogic theory and Knowles' (1980) assumption that adult learners are interested in connecting their life experiences with both new knowledge and the immediacy of application.

A spirit of mutual respect between students and teacher is important for creating the best learning environment (Knowles, 1980). Findings validate the research literature which identifies a need by adult students to build rapport with their instructors in order to facilitate mutual respect and a sense of accessibility. Based on personal accounts shared by participants, individuals indicated that they felt respected as adults when they were encouraged to participate and make contributions to the class based on their life and work experiences.

Students experienced social engagement through collaborative group projects and threaded conversations which students maintained in their hybrid classes. These opportunities for social interaction produced learning, whether it was over a cup of coffee in the student lounge or online with an in-depth conversation. Vygotsky (1978) posited that when learning occurs it is

shaped by the context, communication, and collaboration with others. Study participants confirmed that students were engaged in their learning through robust communication and collaboration. In instances where communication was weak and collaboration was absent, students expressed frustration noting that the course had not provided them a maximum learning experience. This finding is consistent with the research of Swan et al. (2000) in which students reported that peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor interactions were top priorities.

Course content impacted student engagement in multiple ways. First, if students found the information to be relevant and applicable to work and life (Knowles, 1984) they expressed positive regard for the course and the instructor. Second, if students found the course to be well-organized and the instructor was well-prepared they perceived the learning environment to be engaging.

Furthermore, study participants expressed value in the relationships they established with their peers in the hybrid classes. Previous researchers have observed that adults frequently feel insecure when beginning, or returning to, college (Knowles, 1980; Merriam, 2001; Nelken, 2009; Wyatt, 2011). These students contended that the support and encouragement they received from their classmates played a pivotal role in their persistence. In addition to emotional encouragement, students said they relied heavily on one another for support with technology and course management. They also suggested that classmates challenged them to broaden their thinking and to respect the thoughts and various viewpoints of others. It was from these interactions that the bonds of friendship developed.

In summary, insights and observations from study participants were consistent with findings from previous studies in which nontraditional students expressed a desire for institutions to address their needs in terms of flexibility with scheduling, engagement rather than isolation,

and access to needed resources (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Wyatt, 2011). Overall, study participants expressed gratitude for the hybrid classes and viewed them as another option for meeting their needs. Furthermore, students said they were pleased to participate in this study because they felt valued for sharing their experiences and insights.

Implications for Practice

This qualitative study allowed me to “hear” what study participants wanted to voice regarding their experiences with hybrid classes, specifically student engagement in hybrid classes. Based on this research, I recommend that institutions serving undergraduate nontraditional adult learners offer hybrid classes as an additional course format option. The hybrid format offers value to this particular student population and is an affordable alternative for institutions that already have onsite locations. In fact, it can provide cost-savings to institutions that need to maximize their physical space because it allows for doubling-up classroom space when offering hybrid courses on alternating days or weeks.

Another implication for best practice is to provide orientation and training for instructors. To reduce institutional expenses for orientation and training, I recommend utilizing faculty who have received strong reviews from students and supervisors in both face-to-face and online classroom settings. Since not all instructors are comfortable teaching online, and some online instructors are not as comfortable teaching in the classroom, program administrators can vet instructors to make sure the hybrid format is appropriate. Once a strong core group of instructors is identified to teach hybrid courses, these individuals can mentor other instructors so that the professional development is an ongoing endeavor. This process and practice is relevant for both faculty and adjunct instructors.

One implication for improved instructor training includes establishing guidelines. Guidelines for assisting faculty as they develop hybrid courses may allow faculty members to experience online coursework as a student in order to better understand the perspective of students (Graham et al., 2013; Piper, 2010). Another suggestion to aid faculty is to provide proven prototype projects for them to explore (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham et al., 2013; Picciano, 2006). Both the Empire and Mosaic sites provided a template for faculty to review prior to teaching their hybrid courses. However, not all of the faculty members utilized this resource. Faculty reasons for not using these resources, however, were beyond the scope of this investigation.

Ideally, providing resources for faculty who need assistance with the creation of hybrid courses to make effective pedagogical decisions would be beneficial. Additionally, institutional incentives to encourage faculty to explore course delivery options with hybrid courses and other innovative approaches would benefit the adult nontraditional student population.

A best practice to improve the quality of the hybrid experience for students is to provide them with an orientation session as well. It is recommended to incorporate some form of hands-on experience with the learning management system to ensure that students are prepared to use the technology for the online portion of the hybrid class. During the orientation session, it is recommended to have a question and answer period and a portion of the session designed for students to become acquainted with each other. This is intended to facilitate interaction, communication, and connection that adult students identified as engagement. The goal is to help students begin to develop a sense of self-confidence and reduce the fear and anxiety they often experience when returning to college as an adult.

Suggestions for Future Research

For future research, it would be helpful to follow a group of students for the long-term to determine if relationships influence degree persistence and attainment. It may also be worthwhile to explore how nontraditional students perceive their relationships with peers in hybrid classes based on the cohort model. For example, cohort models are used at both the undergraduate and graduate levels and the relationship amongst the members of the cohort is of significance. It would be worth learning whether this cohort model with a hybrid format would have appeal to adult students and the impact on relationships.

I recommend conducting a case study to explore how graduate students perceive hybrid classes and the hybrid format. One area of particular interest would be executive graduate degree programs. Frequently, graduate students in executive programs are enrolled in cohort models similar to hybrid or distance learning. It may be interesting to compare graduate student experiences with the executive cohort model to those without a cohort model that use hybrid class experiences.

Study participants expressed strong feelings about the role of instructors, and how instructors influenced student engagement. Therefore, it may be worthwhile to conduct additional research regarding instructor perceptions of their role in hybrid classes as related to course design, student engagement, and resources for instruction. Specifically, it would be helpful to explore how faculty members view their role with nontraditional adult students and student engagement. This additional research could take a more in-depth view of the relationship between instructors and undergraduate nontraditional adult students and its influence on student engagement.

Researcher Reflections

Upon reflection of this study, I have found a few things I would do to obtain more data. First, I would provide the students with a form, during our first interview, to collect additional information regarding their lives. As the researcher, I believe it would have been interesting to collect data in these areas: gender; first generation status; program of study; type of employment; and year in college. This information may have shed an added value and understanding on the perspective of the students regarding their experiences as undergraduate nontraditional learners in hybrid classes.

Second, I would explore more about their experiences by conducting a focus group. Initially I did not want to conduct a focus group due to concerns about “group think” occurring, but in retrospect, I do not believe that would have been an issue. I believe the students would have been very conversant and would have maintained their views without persuasion from others. I also believe they would have enjoyed the interaction and conversation as a group.

And last, I would have added interview questions about adult students’ fears and insecurities when beginning or returning to college after a gap or absence in their education. Specifically, I would have asked more questions to understand the root of their fears and whether certain class formats, such as online or hybrid, provide a greater sense of security when returning to college.

Conclusion

Originally, I intended to conduct this study at the Empire instructional site, one of the branches of continuing studies for a private research university in the Southeastern United States. However, there were not enough participants so I expanded the study to include another

instructional site, the Mosaic site, located 200 miles from the main campus and the Empire site. In retrospect, there was great value in hearing from students at both locations.

Participants from both sites validated the needs of nontraditional adult students regarding flexibility with scheduling and opportunities for engagement. The students perceived engagement in terms of teacher and social presence through their communication, interaction, and relationships. Knowles' (1980) theory of andragogy, or model of assumptions, regarding adult learning, and the philosophical concept of social constructivism as posited by Vygotsky, is supported by the experiences of the students in this study.

It was evident from student accounts that the Mosaic site had invested more time in teacher training and student orientation regarding hybrid classes. However, students did express frustration regarding some inconsistencies when not all instructors provided the same level of communication. While students at the Empire site expressed interest in more hybrid class options, it was clear that administrators would need to address instructor preparation and improvements in orientation sessions for students at that site too. With greater attention to these areas, student engagement experiences for nontraditional adult learners will continue to improve and facilitate student retention and persistence.

In summary, the themes that emerged from this study revealed the perceptions of undergraduate nontraditional adult learners regarding their experiences with hybrid classes and student engagement. The first theme reinforced the value adult students place on their "time" because they appreciate formats that provide the convenience and flexibility they need to balance their busy lives. The second theme, student engagement in hybrid classes, reiterated the importance of interaction, communication, and relationships. Adult students perceive these factors contribute to their persistence and completion. The third theme was based on the

emotions that nontraditional students experience when returning to college, and also on the emotions that evolved through the process of developing relationships with instructors and peers. The fourth theme identified the various roles of peers, instructors, technology, and institutional leadership and the influence of these roles on students' hybrid class experiences. The fifth and last theme focused on the students' sense of security and confidence and how the hybrid format served as a catalyst to increase self-confidence. The outcome of these themes, coupled with the needs of this student population group, indicate that the hybrid class format is of value to meeting student needs and providing opportunities for engagement that appeal to the adult student, and thus improve the likelihood of student persistence.

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APPENDIX A

DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

In an effort to provide the reader with an understanding of the terms and their context in this study, the following are terms I used throughout this narrative:

Andragogy: Andragogy defines the way adults learn and engage in the learning process (Knowles, 1978).

Adult students: Adult students are identified as those over the age of 25 (Chen, 2014; NCES, 2016). Note: nontraditional students are not necessarily defined as “adult” students because a nontraditional student may be a person younger than age 25.

Blended learning: According to Oliver and Trigwell (2005), the most common understanding of blended learning is the combination of conventional classroom teaching with e-learning.

e-learning: e-learning is a term used to describe electronic- or web-based learning (Oliver & Trigwell, 2005).

Face-to-face classes: Instructional format whereby classes are held onsite in a classroom with the instructor and students physically present.

Hybrid classes: Hybrid classes are taught using any combination of face-to-face class time and e-learning. For the purpose of this study, hybrid classes refers to classes that were taught one week onsite and face-to-face along with alternating weeks of e-learning.

Nontraditional students: Nontraditional students are students who are not *typical* of the traditional student population because they are usually over the age of 25 and share

characteristics that include maintaining responsibilities associated with caring for a family and working while attending college. Many nontraditional students are also part-time students, first generation, or veterans (Compton, Cox, & Laanan, 2006; Wyatt, 2011).

APPENDIX B

INVITATION TO PARTICIPANTS

Date:

Dear _____:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The study explores the perceptions of adult nontraditional students regarding hybrid classes. The study is being conducted by Sherry Chance, a doctoral student in higher education at The University of Alabama and under the direction of Dr. Clair Major. If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed two times: the first time in person and the second time via phone or Skype.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you will be provided with a consent form and options regarding the dates to be interviewed. The first interview will take place at the [REDACTED] campus. Refreshments will be served.

You are not required to participate in this study, but I hope you will give it consideration so that your experiences will provide data for improvements to courses and programs that use the hybrid class format.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please email me ([schance@\[REDACTED\].edu](mailto:schance@[REDACTED].edu)) or call me (601-605-0007) between now and (date).

Many thanks,

Sherry Chance

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Undergraduate Adult Learner's Perceptions of Hybrid Classes

Sherry Chance, The University of Alabama
Graduate Student, Doctor of Education in Higher Education Administration
c/o 2115 Main Street
[REDACTED]
schance@[REDACTED].edu

This study is being conducted by Sherry Chance, a graduate student in the University of Alabama's Doctor of Education degree program and under the supervision of Dr. Claire Major. You are being asked to take part in this qualitative research study. The study is called A Case Study of Undergraduate Nontraditional Adult Learners' Perceptions of Hybrid Classes.

What this study is about:

This study is being conducted to explore undergraduate adult learners' perceptions of hybrid classes. Specifically, this study will explore: (1) adult learners' perceptions of hybrid courses/blended learning, and (2) adult learners' perceptions of student engagement in hybrid courses. Approximately 20 individuals from the School of Continuing Studies will participate in this study which employs a qualitative design. You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been enrolled as student in one or more hybrid classes, and therefore your understanding and experience in hybrid classes is significant to this research.

What you will be asked to do:

If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following:

- (1) Attend an in-person interview and participate in a recorded interview lasting between 45 minutes to one hour. The researcher would like to audio-record the interview.
- (2) Participate in a second interview that will be conducted either by phone or Skyped. It will be recorded and will last approximately 45 minutes.
- (3) Review and provide feedback regarding the transcription of interviews. The estimated time for providing feedback from the participant is approximately 30-45 minutes.
- (4) The total time for participation in this study, which includes two interviews and reviewing the transcripts, will take between two to three hours, and will be spread out from January through March 2017.

Risks and benefits:

There are no known risks to you, so risks for participating in this study would be minimal.

Please note that monetary incentives are not considered a benefit of research participation per the University of Alabama's Institutional Review Board. The information you provide as a participant in this study may prove to be beneficial for the development and delivery of future hybrid classes.

Incentives:

You will receive a \$15.00 iTunes gift card for your time to participate in this study.

Your participation is voluntary:

Participating in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer questions and you may choose to stop participating at any time. Not participating in the study will not result in any penalty to you. Your decision to participate or not to participate in this research study will have no effect on your course grades or relations with the research investigator or [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] School of Continuing Studies.

Your answers to questions will be confidential:

Interviews will be conducted in a private setting to maintain privacy and confidentiality. All interviews and transcripts will be maintained on the researcher's private computer.

Confidentially of participants will be protected as much as possible. Reports of the research will not name or identify participants (pseudonyms will be used).

Contact Information:

If you have questions about the research study, please ask by contacting the researcher, Sherry Chance, using the contact information at the top of the page, or Dr. Claire Major at 205-348-1152. If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about your rights as a participant in the research study, you may contact Ms. Tanta Myles, Research Compliance Officer at The University of Alabama at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach website at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html or email participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu. After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research participants online at http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Survey.html or you may ask the researcher for a copy of it and mail it to UA Office for Research Compliance, Box 870127, 358 Rose Administration Building, Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0127.

I have read this consent form. The study has been explained to me and I understand what I will be asked to do. I agree to freely take part in this research study. I understand that I will receive a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

I understand the researcher would like to audio record my interviews.

I agree to be audio recorded.

I decline to be audio recorded.

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL¹

Project: *Undergraduate Adult Learners' Perceptions of Hybrid Classes*

Time of interview:

Date:

Location:

Interviewee:

Additional notes:

Project description:

Date for second interview:

Thank you for this interview. I would like to schedule our second interview. Or, ask for any additional follow-up information.

Questions (see attached Appendix E or F):

¹Interview Protocol (Creswell, 2013).

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FIRST SET

- 1.) How do you, as an adult student, define hybrid learning?
- 2.) How was the hybrid course option presented to you?
- 3.) How many hybrid courses are you currently enrolled in?
- 4.) Why do you think students become interested in courses with the hybrid learning format?
- 5.) Why did you choose a hybrid course and how many have you taken to date?
- 6.) Did orientation prepare you for hybrid classes?
- 7.) How is hybrid like or unlike face-to-face learning?
- 8.) How would you describe your experience with hybrid learning?
- 9.) Does the hybrid class learning format facilitate student engagement? Explain why or why not.
- 10.) Describe the best hybrid learning experience you have had to date.
- 11.) Describe the worst hybrid learning experience you have had to date. What could have made it better?
- 12.) Does the hybrid class learning format facilitate student engagement? Explain why or why not?

Thank you for participating in this interview. Do you prefer to meet via Skype or phone for the next interview?

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS SECOND SET

- 1.) Did you experience a level of student engagement in a hybrid course? If so, explain the experience. Provide details about one specific thing or event that you found was engaging. Provide details about one specific thing or event that you found was not engaging.
- 2.) How do you perceive hybrid classes in regards to the desired learning outcomes for the course?
- 3.) What suggestions do you have for future orientation sessions regarding hybrid learning classes?
- 4.) Explain how the hybrid class design has or has not met your needs and expectations?
- 5.) What suggestions do you have for improving hybrid classes?
- 6.) Thank you for participating in this interview. Is there any other information that you would like to share regarding your experience with hybrid classes?

APPENDIX G

IRB APPROVAL

December 9, 2016

Sherry Chance
The University of Alabama
Higher Education
Administration Program c/o
2115 Main Street
Madison, MS 39110

Re: IRB # 16-OR-426: "A Case Study of Adult Nontraditional Learners' Perceptions of Hybrid Learning"

Dear Ms. Chance,

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Your approval will expire on December 8, 2017. If the study continues beyond that date, you must complete and submit the Renewal Form within e-Protocol. If you modify the application, please submit the Revision Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Final Report Form. Please use the **IRB-approved (stamped) consent form.**

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this application, please include the assigned IRB approval number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Carpantato T. Myles, MSM, CIM, CIP
Director & Research Compliance Officer
Office for Research Compliance