STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN ONLINE COURSES:
A GROUNDED THEORY CASE STUDY

by

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ABSTRACT

Due to the evolution of online learning, enrollments in online course have reached an all-time high. The concept of student engagement, a historically popular term used within higher education, has adopted many definitions and descriptions over time. As institutions have historically linked student engagement to aspects of academic achievement, retention, student satisfaction, and institutional success, research to determine student engagement as it relates to online students would be beneficial to the field of higher education.

To understand how student engagement applies in distance education, it is necessary to first determine the definition of student engagement as perceived by online students. In this qualitative case study, twenty online learners were interviewed to gain student perceptions of engagement in online course required for distance education programs at a large public institution. Using a constructivist grounded theory approach, their perceptions were used to determine how online students define student engagement in online learning environments. Students involved in this study defined engagement by referencing the completion of coursework, communicating with instructor and peers, and individual engagement. In addition, participants interviewed in this study found discussion boards, video lectures, and individual structured assignments to be among the most engaging activities offered in this specific online course. The study also revealed certain motivations and challenges associated with online learning that contributes to students’ perception and reluctance to define student engagement in online learning. The experiences shared by students lead me to conclude that online learners
develop individual definitions of online engagement by consideration of their own perceptions, personal feelings, and processes of engaging.

The results of this study provide higher education administrators the ability to develop resources to enhance instructional design and communication with online learners to increase overall success in online programs as well as the academic success of virtual campus students. Findings can be shared with administrators across disciplines to implement practices that enhance engagement and improve student satisfaction within online degree programs.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family who provided the love, encouragement, and emotional support necessary to complete my lifelong dream of earning a doctoral degree. To my parents, Greg and Deborah Fields, for raising me to believe that I could do anything and then supporting me in multiple ways during the long journey. To my children, Maci and Dexx, for being my cheerleaders along the way and instantly forgiving me when I had to miss important events. And finally, to my soulmate and husband, Kenny, for being my rock and filling whatever role was needed in the process. Words can’t express how much I appreciate the sacrifices that were made to allow me to accomplish the goal. We did it together, as a family.
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“Everything you do matters. Every move you make, every action you take...matters. Not just to you, or your family, or your business or hometown. Everything you do matters to all of us forever.”
— Andy Andrews

Over the years, I have shared this quote with numerous college students as I encouraged them to overcome certain challenges or pursue their individual goals that seem impossible at the time. The same motivational sentiment that I have shared so many times seems so appropriate now to share as acknowledgment to the multitude of individuals that helped me realize my dream. Your work, encouragement, and support really does matter. Thank you for what you have done to assist me in completing this work. I strive to make a positive impact upon others, just as you have done for me.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Student engagement is frequently found in literature and research within higher education. Through previous works of Alexander Astin (1984), Tinto (1993), George Kuh et al. (2005), Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), and others, we have learned that student engagement has a significant influence on students’ success and development in academia. Most previous studies focused on traditional college students attending university campuses all over the world (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Today, due to the evolution of online learning, a large number of students never step foot on a college campus; instead, they complete entire degree programs virtually by enrolling in online programs. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) explained that the adoption of online learning has enhanced accessibility to higher education and therefore also created the demand for greater accountability in higher education as it relates to students’ outcomes, student attitudes about learning, and overall student interaction. Researchers question whether the same learning objectives can be met in an online environment in comparison to those created in face-to-face settings (Chen, Lambert & Guidry, 2009; Chen & Jang, 2010; Fisher, 2010; Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Roby, Ashe, Singh & Clark, 2013; Wyatt, 2011). Opinions held by administration and faculty, along with results of conducted research studies, affect accreditation benchmarks and institutional rankings (Bennett & Bennett, 2002; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Seok, 2007).

As online enrollments continue to grow, institutions are faced with the challenge of meeting the academic needs of a diverse population. College and universities continue to grow in
part because distance education widens the boundaries of student access and allows institutions to increase revenue with only marginal costs (Bray, Harris & Major, 2007; Major, 2010). To remain competitive with other growing institutions that are offering online coursework, colleges seek to develop quality online courses that provide distance learners with resources and educational experiences comparable to traditional campus students. With barriers of time and distance, instructors are left with the increased responsibility to engage online learners within the virtual classroom without fully understanding how online learners perceive engagement. The literature provides examples of classroom techniques that stimulate student engagement (Ko & Rossen, 2010); however, few qualitative studies have been produced to describe student perceptions of these methods and how they experience engagement in online courses.

Various reports have shown that overall college enrollment is decreasing, but enrollment in online courses and programs has steadily increased over the past decade (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016; Higher Education & Best Colleges.com, 2016; Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Approximately 32% of all college students are now enrolled in online coursework (Seaman et al., 2018). As numbers are expected to rise, scholars should determine if engagement, as it applies to traditional on-campus students, carries the same meaning within a virtual environment. Institutions link student engagement, for both traditional and online students, to components of academic achievement, attrition, retention, motivation, student satisfaction, and institutional success (Beer, Clark & Jones, 2010; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Kuh, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Kuyini, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). For this reason, additional research involving student engagement as it relates to online students would be beneficial to the field of higher education.
Background

The history of fully online courses actually began in 1981 when Western Behavioral Sciences Institute (WBSI) offered an adult education course, a non-profit organization located in La Jolla, California (Miller, 2014). WBSI, through their School of Management and Strategic Studies, began offering series of programs that used teleconferencing as a way to provide professional development through lectures presented by well-known faculty and lecturers. In the following years, online programs were introduced to executive programs, and online learning was introduced to primary and secondary education. Undergraduate and graduate courses, offered by various colleges and universities were more fully introduced to higher education shortly thereafter. In 1986, the first online graduate degree program was offered by Florida’s Nova Southeastern University, and the first accredited full web-based college, Jones International University, began in 1996 (Miller, 2014). While online education was introduced well over 35 years ago, the invention of the World Wide Web in 1992 greatly expanded accessibility of online learning and allowed various innovative pedagogical tools to enhance learning across all levels of education (Harasim, 2000). By the late 1990s, several institutions began to adopt e-learning systems that created a standardized platform for course management and delivery (Miller, 2014). Today, we have organizations such as Online Learning Consortium (OLC), United States Distance Learning Association, and The Learning House, all of which devote many of their efforts to provide support and distribute surveys that assess the progress of institutions providing online education.

Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, with different co-authors over the years, have consistently provided a report that focuses on online courses and offerings of higher education institutions
across the United States. For over thirteen years they have provided a consistent definition of online courses. A recent chart describing options follows (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1  Description of College Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proportion of Content Delivered Online</th>
<th>Type of Course</th>
<th>Typical Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>Course where no online technology used — content is delivered in writing or orally.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 to 29%</td>
<td>Web Facilitated</td>
<td>Course that uses web-based technology to facilitate what is essentially a face-to-face course. May use a learning management system (LMS) or web pages to post the syllabus and assignments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 79%</td>
<td>Blended/Hybrid</td>
<td>Course that blends online and face-to-face delivery. Substantial proportion of the content is delivered online, typically uses online discussions, and typically has a reduced number of face-to-face meetings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+%</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>A course where most or all of the content is delivered online. Typically have no face-to-face meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2016, p. 7)

In their most recent survey, Grade Increase, Seaman et al. (2018) reported that over 6.3 million students now complete at least one course online. Of that number, over 80% of those students are enrolled in undergraduate coursework. While not all students are enrolled in online degree programs, the number of institutions now offering online degree opportunities has consistently increased over the past decade (Allen et al., 2016). Over a ten-year review, Allen and Seaman (2013) reported that 62% of higher education institutions advanced from providing only online courses to providing full online programs. In 2002, only 34.5% of higher education institutions offered full online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2013). The report indicated that over 3 million students are now taking all their college courses via distance with the largest majority enrolled in public institutions (Seaman et al., 2018). The following chart indicated the number of students recently enrolled at the various types of academic institutions (see Figure 1.1).
Various reports and research studies describe online learners as nontraditional college students and usually older adults, ranging between the ages of 22 and 50, who typically maintain family, work, or other responsibilities while seeking academic credentials (Allen et al., 2016; Angelino et al., 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Wyatt, 2011; Yoo & Huang, 2013). In a recent survey, researchers discovered that it is more difficult than ever to describe a typical online student as the age ranges are expanding to include students as young as 18 and as old as 59 (Higher Education.com and Best Colleges.com, 2016, p. 7). The survey indicated that approximately 56% of students who are enrolled in online courses are female, which was not surprising since a larger number of women are enrolled in college overall (Higher Education.com and Best Colleges.com, 2016; McFarland et al., 2017). A 2016 report provided by Higher Education.com and Best Colleges.com showed that over 65% of students who complete online courses are employed full-time. In comparison to traditional campus students, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that 43% of full-time students and 78% of
part-time students were employed (McFarland et al., 2017). Both results indicating that a large percentage of students are juggling demands of both academics and employment.

In adapting to online pedagogy, instructors are also charged to find various ways to engage students in course content while overcoming the various challenges of online learning. While learning management systems and Web 2.0 software have enhanced instructor’s ability to provide interactive learning, they still do not replace the student’s responsibility to engage in activities and discussion within a classroom environment (Chen et al., 2009). Technology has provided resources to enrich distance education, but studies show that distance learners are still less engaged in classes and face lower retention rates than campus students (Fisher, 2010; Kuyini, 2011). Without proper motivation to engage in learning, students are more likely to withdraw from coursework and postpone their academic goals (Kuh, 2009; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2012). Many academic leaders also feel that it is more difficult to retain students enrolled in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In consideration of the potential relation between student engagement and retention among online learners, various authors have recommended additional research to determine how engagement contributes to student enrollment and overall academic success (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Allen & Seaman, 2016; Angelino et al., 2007; Beer, et al, 2010; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Kuyini, 2011; O’Neill & Thompson, 2013; Wyatt, 2011).

To understand how student engagement applies in distance education, it is necessary to first determine the definition of student engagement as perceived by online students. George Kuh (2009), founder of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) offered this explanation of student engagement:
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. 5)

Kuh (2009) further explained that the meaning of student engagement continues to evolve over time. Robinson and Hullinger (2008) concurred with various others who think “student engagement pertains to the time and physical energy that students expend on activities in their academic experience” (p. 101). Furthermore, their study realized that engagement is positively affected by higher levels of academic challenge, student-faculty interaction, active and collaborative learning, and real-life application of coursework (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Deneen (2010) noticed that many dictionaries provide definitions of engagement that are now obsolete and he encouraged readers to focus on a recent definition of “a rendezvous between learning and the digital tools and techniques that excites students” (paragraph 5). Technology provides us with various innovative tools in online learning, but we still must learn which aspects of online learning students perceive to be engaging.

In general, online learners value the learning experience but do not expect to be actively engaged with other students in their coursework (Angelino et al., 2007; Holley & Taylor, 2009). Adult students may even appreciate the asynchronous style of online learning because it does not require them to log in at certain times or directly interact with classmates or faculty (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Roby et al., 2012; Sibold, 2016). While the most successful online learners are independent, self-motivated, and determined to complete course without much assistance,
thoughtful development of engaging coursework and interaction with faculty and students can greatly enhance a student’s ability for success (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004; Major, 2015). However, while juggling additional responsibilities and overcoming various obstacles such as time demands and finances, adult learners may lose motivation to maintain enrollment if they are not actively engaged in their academic courses (Bray et al., 2007; Park & Choi, 2009).

The field is rich with suggestions of proper engagement techniques to benefit both traditional students and online learners. George Kuh, founder of the widely used National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), referenced Chickering and Gamson’s Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education as one of the “best known set of engagement indicators” (Kuh, 2002). Chickering and Gamson (1987) offered these seven principles based on research conducted to determine good teaching and learning in colleges and universities:

1. Encourages contact between students and faculty.
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.
5. Emphasizes time on task.
6. Communicates high expectations.
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.

The authors encouraged, “while each practice can stand on its own, when all are present their effect multiply. Together, they employ six powerful forces in education: activity, expectations, cooperation, interaction, diversity, and responsibility” (p. 1-2). Following the seven principles the NSSE was designed to “assess the extent to which students are engaged in empirically derived good educational practices and what they gain from their college experience” (Kuh, 2002, p. 2). The survey asks students various questions that seek to determine their participation and use of various campus resources as well as their involvement in academic coursework, learning communities, community service, social activities, and various other aspects of college
life. Over the past several decades, the survey’s instrument, referred to as “The College Student Report,” has been used to provide a benchmark for good educational practices offered at colleges and universities nationwide (Kuh, 2001). In general, however, this report is generated by responses obtained from campus students and does not include online students or distance learners.

Due to the increased difficulty to retain students in online learning, over 40% of academic leaders consider retention a significant barrier in the growth of online instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2014). This percentage has grown over the past decade. The graph below (see Figure 1.2) indicates the growth over the past decade.

Figure 1.2 Retaining Students is a Greater Problem for Online Courses than it is for Face-to-Face Courses

![Bar chart showing retention rates for online and face-to-face courses from 2004 to 2013.](image)

(Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 18)

Tinto (2012) rationalized that student retention and the related term of persistence can sometimes be confused when trying to determine student success. Student retention, an institutional construct, refers to “the rate at which an institution retains and graduates students who first enter the institution as freshman at a given point in time” while persistence refers to “the rate at which
students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and
eventually complete their degree, regardless of where they do so” (Tinto, 2012, p. 127).

Tinto (2012) further explained that measurement of both retention and persistence can
become even more difficult to obtain because some students might have to cease college
attendance at times, or “stop out” (p. 127). Attendance may be suspended for just a semester or
even for years to handle other commitments related to various adult responsibilities. This is
particularly difficult due to the enrollment statuses of distance learners. In the 2016 Online
Education Trends produced by Best Colleges.com, their survey determined that approximately
40% of non-traditional adult learners are enrolled on a part-time basis. Adult learners may be
forced to maintain only part-time enrollment status to successfully manage school along with
other responsibilities (Wyatt, 2011). This adoption of a non-traditional course load compromises
institution’s traditional definitions of ‘active enrollment’ and ‘considerable completion time.’
Although online learners may be making progress toward degree completion, they may not be
reported appropriately on institutional reports because normal persistence or graduation
completion time is not the same as that of traditional college students.

Closely related to retention, attrition has become one of the greatest concerns among
administrators as online learners frequently withdraw from courses on a semester-by-semester
basis. Angelino et al. (2007) refer to attrition as “a decrease in the number of students
participating in course activities or a degree program” and explain that it takes place when a
student withdraws from a class or the program of study (p. 2-3). Attrition impacts both
persistence and retention rates. Students who withdraw from classes during a term may find it
more challenging to enroll in a future term. Students often appreciate the break of commitment in
academic studies and never find the optimal time to resume enrollment (Angelino et al., 2007).
Furthermore, high attrition rates also affect the perceived quality of educational delivery by an institution as it may affect college rankings (Angelino et al., 2007).

Understanding the reasons for student attrition can help institutions determine what services and delivery methods are needed to properly serve students enrolled in distance education courses (Angelino et al., 2007). In Angelino, Williams, and Natvig’s (2007) study, they found that student attrition could be decreased by using strategies of student integration and engagement, learner-centered approaches, learning communities and accessibility to online student services (p. 6). Park and Choi (2009) also suggest that adult learners are more likely to stop out if it is difficult to reach the instructor or get feedback with specific questions or concerns. Arbaugh (2009) reported that students who are more engaged tend to access the course content more frequently and communicate with their instructors and fellow students more often. Chickering and Gamson (1987) suggested that student-faculty interaction might also be the most important factor of student motivation, engagement, and persistence. Other scholars uphold the importance of student-faculty interaction within online learning, contributing increased interaction to improved student learning and student satisfaction (Bangert, 2004; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Roby et al., 2014; Sarder, 2014).

Various other researchers suggested that motivation may affect persistence and also be one of the causes of online attrition (Boton & Gregory, 2015; O’Neill & Thompson, 2013). O’Neill and Thompson (2013) stated that it is important to understand the factors that sustain motivation in order to better understand adult learner persistence. Researchers attributed the “lack of good connection between learners” as a contributing factor of attrition and stated that motivation is an essential element within online education (Boton & Gregory, 2015, p. 64). Lee, Pate, and Cozart (2005) suggested that motivation is equally important as engagement in online
courses because students must “not only have the desire to participate, but also actively participate in learning tasks” (p. 55).

In summary, defining student engagement is complex and varies among individuals. When studying the concept, more direct attention to related factors can provide a better understanding of engagement as a whole. Major (2015) argued that engagement is somewhat of a “psychological investment” and involves factors including motivation, attention, involvement, and intellectual effort (p. 209). While technology can be a mediator between the instructor and students, faculty may have less control and authority of engagement within a virtual classroom due to the lack of physical boundaries and direct interaction that is more easily accomplished within a traditional classroom setting (Major, 2015). For this reason, students face increased responsibility to engage in course activities and develop their own level of motivation and commitment to complete the tasks at hand. Additional research that involves attention to related factors can assist in better understanding engagement as it relates to unique populations.

**Statement of the Problem**

While instruments such as George Kuh’s National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) have proven to be helpful for campus administrators to determine the level of academic and social interaction among peers pursuing an education on traditional college campuses, they do not adequately represent distance learners who do not attend on-campus activities. Online learners, who are often older and living miles away, are less likely to engage in activities with peers for various reasons (Price & Baker, 2012; Richards, 2011). Lack of social motivation, time constraints, and various other commitments make it difficult to apply attendance or interaction, well-known indicators of social engagement, to non-traditional students who deal with inhibiting factors. Additional findings confirm that the term engagement has varied meanings, based upon
how engagement applies to the individual on a direct and personal level (Kearsley & Sneiderman, 1998; Kim & Frick, 2011; Wyatt, 2011; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Some researchers claimed students are more likely to maintain engagement throughout coursework if they can solve real life scenarios or incorporate learned knowledge into their daily lives (Kearsley & Sneiderman, 1998; Kim & Frick, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Other students are simply motivated by more intrinsic ideas of lifelong learning and accomplishment of academic career goals (Wyatt, 2011; Yoo & Huang, 2013).

In consideration of the various obstacles related to online learning and the diverse demographics of the distance population, it would be helpful to determine if engagement means the same in a virtual environment as it does in a traditional campus setting. NSSE focuses on four main engagement themes, including academic challenge, learning with peers, experiences with faculty, and campus environment. While these themes can be adapted to relate to online learners, few researchers have conducted assessments and provided qualitative research to contribute to efforts of effectively engaging online learners. More specifically, the field does not provide adequate attention to understand how online students define engagement in a virtual learning environment and what aspects of that environment promote engagement. Since professors and students do not typically see each other directly, higher education researchers and practitioners should seek to hear their voices and gain their perception of engagement in the virtual classroom. While quantitative research is helpful in becoming aware of key themes and related correlations, the field would benefit from more qualitative studies that provide rich language and contexts of perspectives as seen through individual thoughts and experiences. This study sought to describe online students’ perceptions of engagement and gain a better understanding of the various aspects of learning in an online environment that engage students in
the online learning experience.

Purpose

In this qualitative grounded theory case study, I obtained student perceptions of engagement in an online course required for distance education programs at a large public institution. I introduced several components of student engagement and how students perceived various aspects contributed to their overall engagement within online courses. The results of this study provide higher education administrators the ability to develop resources to enhance instructional design and communication with online learners to increase overall success in online programs as well as the academic success of virtual campus students. Findings will be shared with administrators across disciplines to implement practices that enhance engagement and improve student satisfaction within online degree programs.

Significance

Online learning students possess characteristics that are different from traditional college students. While online students may enjoy the flexibility of completing lectures and coursework with lesser restrictions on time and place, they often choose this format to perform other responsibilities such as full-time employment and family duties. In the students’ challenges of juggling many obligations, attrition rates are 10-20% higher and retention rates are 10-20% lower for distance education courses compared to courses taught in a face-to-face setting (Angelino et al., 2007; Herbert, 2006). Angelino et al. (2007) explained that “high attrition rates have a negative economic impact” as they affect “the costs for development delivery, and assessment, as well as lost tuition revenue, resulting in wasted expenditures for the institution” (p, 2). For students, failure to successfully complete coursework not only affects their financial investment in education, but it might also result in a lower grade point average at the institution.
or emotional devastation, causing them to never return to school in the future (Angelino et al., 2007; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Lee, Pate, & Cozart, 2015). Fisher (2010) discovered that distance learners are less engaged than students involved in a traditional classroom setting due to a lack of equal interpersonal interactions with faculty and students as well as the lack of participation in campus activities due to students’ part-time enrollment status.

Researchers have been able to provide many statistics regarding the numbers and characteristics of online learners, but few studies provide a qualitative analysis from a student’s perspective of their experience in online learning (Blackmon & Major, 2012). By gaining a better understanding of how students perceive to be engaged in online courses, administrators can provide necessary resources, such as training, innovative software, and support staff, to assist instructional designers and instructors as they develop online courses. Faculty members can review findings to determine how students’ perceptions respond to various styles of pedagogy and technological tools used within an online environment. Faculty can use this type of study to enhance the quality within their own online courses by altering current methods or incorporating innovative activities based upon participants’ responses.

Enhancements to development and delivery affect the overall quality of online courses, which lead to more successful online degree programs. A recent report by Higher Education and Best Colleges.com, “2016 Trends in Online Education,” quoted faculty saying, “Online faculty members are interested in learning more about motivating students, encouraging critical thinking, online learning theories, online teaching presence and building a learning community” (p.12). Furthermore, students involved in the improved online courses will gain encouragement and knowledge by being involved in more engaging online courses. Students will also likely gain a higher level of course satisfaction and become more academically successful. By reviewing the
findings of this study, students, faculty, and administrators will benefit from a greater understanding and appreciation of student motivation and engagement in online courses. Furthermore, higher education constituents can use results to build quality online degree programs that make the academic experience more enjoyable and successful for all involved.

**Overview of Methodology**

The design for this qualitative study followed a grounded theory approach that included interviews of currently enrolled online undergraduate students. By conducting a case study, I was able to conduct a study that allowed me to understand a specific population, bounded by a specific semester of enrollment in a required online course offered by a specific program in one college of a large university. I sought to gain a better understanding of the various perspectives of online learners to determine how they defined engagement and how their views applied to their overall educational experience in online learning (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Because previous studies have focused on campus students and the resulting development of student engagement theories based on those students, a grounded theory approach to case study helped me determine if engagement in online courses differs from our understanding of how engagement applies to traditional campus students. Data collection methods consisted of one-on-one semi-structured interviews with undergraduate online students who are currently enrolled in a junior-level course at a large university in the United States. Data analysis involved coding transcribed interviews using initial, focused, and theoretical coding, with the expectation that the analysis would provide a solid foundation for a grounded theory of online student engagement.

**Organization of the Dissertation**

This dissertation was divided into five chapters. In the first chapter, I provided an introduction to the study, which included background information and explanation of the
problem. This chapter also explained the purpose and significance of the proposed study. A review of the literature as it relates to online learning and engagement is provided in Chapter 2. The chapter also included a review of online pedagogy and challenges associated with online learning, indicators of student engagement in an online learning environment and theoretical frameworks used to research online education. In Chapter 3, I described the methodology and methods along with the rationale for choosing a qualitative approach that included interviews involving currently enrolled students completing a fully online undergraduate degree at a large, public university. The findings of the study, along with themes revealed through a grounded theory approach, were stated in Chapter 4. In the final chapter, analysis of data were further discussed to address the three main research questions of the qualitative study. In Chapter 5, I also described implications for practice along with recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

In chapter two, I present a review of literature that is divided into three sections. In the first section, I review student engagement in online learning by introducing aspects of online pedagogy and challenges associated with engaging in online coursework. The second section introduces indicators of student engagement and how they have been identified in an online learning environment. The third section examines previously conducted research studies and theoretical frameworks used to describe student engagement within online education.

Student Engagement in Online Learning

Over the past several decades, references to distance education and online learning have been somewhat interchangeable. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) defined distance education as “education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor” and states that it may include technologies such as Internet, cable satellite, wireless communication devices, audio conferencing, and DVDs and CD-ROMs (McFarland et al., 2017, p. 33). Although NCES does not specifically define online learning, it has become a subcategory of distance education that is known for the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web (Harnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011). Allen et al. (2016) described online courses as a course where at least 80% of all content is delivered online with typically no face-to-face meetings (p. 7). For the purpose of this literature review, I focused on online courses that were solely offered via the Internet and the World Wide Web. Due to the continued growth of online education, educators have adopted many of the new technologies to
use within their online learning environments, so this section discussed the basic methods of online delivery along with pedagogy styles that have been implemented in online education.

**Delivery Methods**

**Learning Management Systems.** Learning managements systems (LMS), such as Blackboard, Desire2Learn, and Moodle, have become some of the most widely used educational tools in distance education by providing instructors a template to create their online course content (Beer et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2010; Coates, 2007; Ituma, 2011; Horspool & Lange, 2012; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Palmer, 2012; Revere & Kovach, 2011). Also referred to as a course management system or virtual learning environment, these software programs generally contain numerous instructional functions that allow instructors to post lectures, initiate discussions, embed videos, and give quizzes all within one central platform (Beer et al., 2010; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Learning management systems give institutions the ability to deliver a large number of courses within the confines of a customized university platform. With the LMS, faculty members can integrate a wide range of teaching methods and course tools that allow them to engage with their students on individual levels (Coates, 2007). In regards to assessment, LMS instructors are able to run various reports of student activity to determine their involvement in discussions, activities, and learning outcomes. For example, Ituma (2011) determined that a large majority of online students accessed the Blackboard course on a daily basis. The study also showed that students found the most helpful components of a learning management system to be course content, assignments, discussion, and announcements (Ituma, 2011).

Several researchers contend that additional studies should be performed to address the limitations of LMS that may reduce the ability of synchronous learning and regular
communication and feedback (Beer et al., 2010; Coates, 2007, Revere & Kovach, 2011). Researchers have questioned the structure of the learning management systems that present defaulted formats and limited tools and their effect on individual study habits and learning engagement (Beer et al., 2010). For institutions that require the use of a learning management system, instructors may be limited to a specific set of teaching tools or pedagogical methods (Beer et al., 2010; Coates, 2007; Ko & Rossen, 2010). Revere and Kovach (2011) argued that course management systems do not properly address the challenge of accessibility when students are required to login to the system on a regular basis to access course announcements and assignments. Students who travel frequently or through remote areas might not have the same availability or capability to access the course as needed. However Palmer (2012) learned that the majority of students who access an LMS do so from home.

**Web-based Applications.** Today, the World Wide Web provides numerous web-based applications that can serve as platforms to offer online content. Instructors may choose to use these applications in the absence of a learning management system and as additional resources to complement what is offered in the management system. Even in a traditional classroom, instructors are requiring students to use technology, such as the Internet and multimedia, to complete course assignments (Nelson Laird & Kuh, 2005). Research studies from various scholars have revealed that both traditional campus students and online learners benefit from the use of web-based learning technology as the use of technology results in positive relationships pertaining to enhanced student engagement and desirable learning outcomes (Chen et al., 2010; Nelson Laird & Kuh, 2005).

A recent report provided by Higher Education and BestColleges.com (2016) indicated that today’s college students use a variety of social networks to connect with family and friends
as well as school and work. Social media boards, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest, and others, can serve as a discussion forum or as a board to link content related to the academic topics presented by the instructor (Higher Education & BestColleges.com, 2016; Revere & Kovach, 2011). Revere and Kovach (2011) explained that Twitter can be used to foster engagement by enhancing two-way course communication to alert students about course related announcements, current events, and networking opportunities with experts in the field. Research conducted by the Pew Research Center reported that 74% of adults who use the Internet also use social media sites (Higher Education & BestColleges.com, 2016). Revere and Kovach (2011) discovered that students are more likely to receive and respond to class announcements through social media platforms since they use these type of applications on handheld or mobile devices on a daily basis.

Online instructors may often recommend the use of Google applications, such as calendar, gmail, hangouts, scholar, docs, task, and others, to develop direct communication among students and share content easily (Higher Education & BestColleges.com, 2016; Revere & Kovach, 2011). YouTube has become a very popular website that allows individuals to upload their own videos to view, share, and comment on the content (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Instructors may embed YouTube videos within their learning modules or share as part of a class discussion (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Account holders can create personal YouTube channels that can be public to all viewers or restricted to approved users. Many universities have created their own channels for recruitment purposes and some instructors have created specialized channels to share specific course content that includes lectures or instructional content (Sherer & Shea, 2011). Other software companies, such as Wimba, Voice-Thread, Pow-Wow-Now, and Skype,
allow instructors to use audio and video messages to communicate in real-time with students and faculty, which can also enhance student-learning experiences (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

**Communication Tools**

Over the past decade, literature has provided the field of online education with descriptions of a variety of online teaching methods. Within these studies, researchers have described how techniques have improved a classroom experience and also offer suggestions in improving instruction to increase student success and enhance the quality of distance education courses (Bennett & Bennett, 2002; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Jarosewich et al., 2010; Ko & Rossen, 2011; Major, 2015; Outlaw & Rice, 2015; Paloff & Pratt, 2007; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Sarder, 2014; Sherer & Shea, 2011). Within a virtual classroom, students may have the option to participate in either asynchronous or synchronous communication. Some instructors may even provide a combination of the two types of delivery. Asynchronous communication allows the instructors to relay content and messages but without having to be in the same place at the same time. This type of communication, which involves emails, discussion boards, social media and blogs, wikis, and general lectures, generally includes a lag in time before either party receives response or feedback. Synchronous communication allows instructors and classmates to communicate at the same time, usually within chat rooms, online conferences, or live video streaming. A deeper review of these tools assist the researcher in identifying key indicators of engagement when used in online courses.

**Asynchronous Communication.** Researchers have documented both benefits and challenges of asynchronous communication (deNoyelles, Zydney & Chen, 2014; Chen et al., 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Lim, 2004; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Sherer & Shea, 2011). Various researchers realized that asynchronous learning allows students
more time to think more critically and be more reflective in their responses to online discussions, which ultimately leads to higher levels of thinking, such as analysis, synthesis, judgement and application of knowledge (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Huang and Hsiao (2012) also declared that both instructors and students appreciate the equal opportunity for participation that asynchronous discussions provide. Since students have more time to think and respond, an asynchronous environment allows for a higher quality of discussion from a greater number of classmates (Chen et al., 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

In a traditional classroom environment, discussions may be dominated by a select few students or confined by a strict time frame. The most challenging aspects of asynchronous communication deal with the fact that students are separated by time and distance that create delayed feedback and instant response of classmates (deNoyelles et al., 2014; Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Without visual and verbal cues which create context and tone, miscommunication is more likely to occur within this type of environment (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Students and instructors may misunderstand a student’s explanation or reference and then lead to additional messages for clarification, which would require additional effort and time. The lack of direct communication also lessens the social interaction presented within a face-to-face classroom environment (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Students often experience a sense of isolation by disconnection with their classmates and instructor (Blackmon & Major, 2012; deNoyelles et al., 2014).

Email. Email is known to be among the most used forms of asynchronous communication within online learning environments (Dixon, 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998; Sull, 2013). Results of various research studies support the conclusion that both students and faculty enjoy the convenient use of email to communicate with
each other (Dixon, 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998; Sull, 2013). Faculty recognize email as an easy tool but also report concerns of the time and attention needed to respond to emails appropriately (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). Sull (2013) refers to email as the “umbilical cord that connects you to students” (p. 2) and encourages instructors to respond to student inquiries within 24 hours to keep the student engaged in the course. In regards to engagement, email is used as a communication tool to ensure an understanding between both individuals. Professors use this instrument to send messages to the entire class at one time, much like an announcement or as a reminder for upcoming assignments or assessments. The biggest challenge with email involves time delays involved with asynchronous communication (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Sull, 2013). One party will send an email, but it may not be read by the recipient immediately. Regardless, while we do not know the exact level of engagement, Huang and Hsiao (2012) reminded readers that email is an easy and convenient way to ensure that students are at least somewhat engaged in an online course.

**Discussion Boards.** Discussion boards support student engagement by providing “a mechanism for students to increase their knowledge through student-driven content and/or a forum for peer review and exchange that creates a supportive climate within online classes” (Revere & Kovach, 2011, p. 115). Discussion boards have become a popular form for learning, as they provide benefits to the entire class as students and the instructor have a virtual dialogue through comments and posts (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Hoskins, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Theide, 2012). Students can review and comment on other classmates’ posts to contribute to the overall understanding of general assignments and topics (Hoskins, 2012; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Theide, 2012). A study conducted by Cho and Tobias (2016) showed that
online discussions also have a significant impact on social presence within an online environment and proves to be beneficial in the learning process and interaction with others.

However, studies reported by several researchers argued that discussion boards might also hinder engagement when students do not contribute to threads in a timely manner or fail to respond with sincere and thoughtful posts (Holley & Taylor, 2008; Revere & Kovach, 2011). An additional study directed by Jarosewich et al. (2010) showed that online discussions do not guarantee quality interactions since students, unless prompted, generally only reply to general questions and rarely challenge their peers to a “higher levels of analysis or reflection” (p. 118). Regardless, Sull (2013) asserted, since discussion boards can likely become the “heart of an online course,” instructors should respond to mostly all student postings to allow students to see their constant presence in the course (p. 2). A study by Cho and Tobias (2016) reinforced the importance of the instructor’s interaction in online discussion threads by comparing instructor involvement in two separate online classrooms. Open communication and group cohesion was experienced on a much higher level within the classroom that included an instructor who actively participated in the online discussion thread in comparison to an instructor that had no communication at all. However, Dixson (2010) concluded that instructors should be minimally active in the class discussions to avoid a decrease in student participation due to the fear of disagreement or misunderstanding.

**Blogs.** Social media and blogs, initially developed as a technology to allow younger individuals to personally connect with friends, family, and acquaintances in an online environment, are somewhat like discussion boards and chat sessions as they allow individuals to post their own personal content online (Paloff & Pratt, 2007; Revere & Kavach, 2011; Thiede, 2012). While Paloff and Pratt (2007) did not encourage the use of blogs in online classrooms,
others, Ko & Rossen (2010) as well as Revere & Kovach (2011) argued that blogs can provide a forum for students to share and discuss knowledge, outside of what is provided in learning management systems, that likely enhances their overall understanding and success in online courses. Faculty may ask students to submit assignments through blogs in which they report on topics and respond to their peers comments and reviews as well (Thiede, 2012). Revere and Kovach (2011) supported the accessibility of blogs as students can contribute easily by most any type of Internet-capable device and are more likely to respond faster since they are likely visiting these types of sites on a more regular basis for personal reasons on a daily basis. Micro blogs, such as Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites, can also enhance engagement by allowing students to build professional networks and peer relationships within their field of study.

**Wikis.** Wikis are technologies that provide the opportunity for collaboration and student engagement with peers by using a web space that allows students to create content that can be shared with group members and edited as needed for group projects (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Many LMS programs also have a similar component within their system that allows online learners to experience peer interaction without being restricted by boundaries of time and distance. Angelino et al. (2007) contend that student engagement helps distance learners overcome challenges of “physical separation, feeling of isolation, lack of support and feeling disconnected” (p. 7). Valentine (2002) confirmed the need for collaborative learning that Wikis provide, as it requires students to participate and engage in student dialog. Research provided by Kuyini (2011) and Robinson and Hullinger (2008) revealed that students favor collaborative projects and benefitted from enhanced learning outcomes.
Lectures. Technology provides many options to assist online instructors in developing an engaging lecture that can be accessible within online classrooms. Instructors can create presentations by using basic software, such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint, or by using web-based applications such as Prezi, Google Slides, Keynote, Slideshare, and others. Instructors can use technology to create audio-recorded lectures or even video-recorded lectures that can be uploaded and stored within learning management systems or a variety of web-based forums. Many researchers recommend that faculty incorporate online videos within their online classrooms to foster participation and increase student engagement (Hoskins, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Sherer & Shea, 2011). However, few researchers have conducted research studies that compare the differences of students’ perceptions of lectures that are audio or video recorded to those that are just text based. Little data have been produced that addresses what types of lectures are more engaging within an online environment.

Synchronous Communication. In the past decade, technology experts have provided additional resources to combat the challenges of asynchronous learning and provided more synchronous options such as chat rooms, instant messaging, and web conferencing (Huang & Hsiao, 2012). This real-time communication provides a forum for immediate feedback and an opportunity to directly interact with faculty and classmates. Researchers have found that synchronous communication also has a positive influence on group collaboration, understanding students’ learning attitudes, and student satisfaction (Huang & Hsiao, 2012).

Chat rooms. Much like discussion boards, chat sessions are also being used in online courses to encourage interaction among students as well as the instructor of the course. Chat rooms allow students to communicate with others by typing into a text box that is sent directly to the other recipient. Unlike discussion boards, chat sessions allow the opportunity to
communicate with class members in a synchronous environment, which may lessen the frustrations many have with discussion boards (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Lundberg and Seridan (2015) established that chat rooms offered helpful support for students as they worked with one another to solve problems and understand course material. Other educators labeled chat rooms as an essential tool that allows instructors to engage with the students on a regular basis to answer questions and explain course concepts (Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Sull, 2013). Chat sessions require instructors and students to be available at the same time, which can be troublesome for many distance learners. Findings presented from Ituma (2011) and Revere and Kovach (2011) reported that not all students perceive chat sessions as a valuable experience because course discussion can often be controlled by a specific few individuals and prevent others from contributing or even gaining an adequate understanding of all topics discussed.

**Web-conferencing.** Software companies and web-based applications have created the ability to communicate in real-time through live video feed. Programs, such as Wimba Collaboration Suite, Voice-Thread, Blackboard Collaboration, Skype, and Google Hangouts allow students and instructors to communicate directly through web and video conferencing (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Using these tools, individuals can use a microphone and video recorder to directly communicate with others. In most cases, multiple participants can participate at one time. Instructors can provide lectures, answer questions, and provide feedback just as they would in traditional classrooms to students who are actively logged in to these synchronous programs. Students can schedule a specific time to work with classmates to complete course projects or assignments. Skylar (2009) learned that both asynchronous and synchronous lectures were effective in delivery of content by online instructors; however, almost 75% of the
participants in her study indicated that they would rather use synchronous web conferences lectures rather than participate in an asynchronous text-based lecture course.

**Challenges of Online Learning**

**Sense of Isolation.** Many students expressed a sense of isolation because they are not able to attend classes on campus and have direct communication with their instructor and classmates (Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Meyer, 2014; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2011). The sense of isolation may be related to a variety of reasons due to the diversity of the student population of online learning. Online learners are typically older, at least 25 years of age, and hold other responsibilities in addition to their schoolwork (Angelino, 2007; Beer et al., 2010; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Meyer, 2014; Park & Choi, 2009; Price & Baker, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). While maintaining full-time employment and family responsibilities, they may not be able to devote as adequate amount of time to their coursework as they would like (Angelino, 2007; Bangert, 2004; Beer et al., 2010; Blackmon & Major, 2012; Fisher, 2010; Price & Baker, 2011; Wyatt, 2011). Other students expressed concern with the lack of interaction with their instructors and classmates (Blackmon & Major, 2012; Dixon, 2010; deNoyelles et al., 2014; Fisher, 2010; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Holley & Taylor, 2008; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Robinson, 2008; Roby et al., 2013; Wyatt, 2011).

**Technology.** Access to content in an online course is dependent on accessibility to technology. This is certainly a challenge for both online instructors and students. Furthermore, instructors are continually challenged to learn new technologies and apply new types of pedagogy within a virtual environment (Berge, 1998; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Roby et al., 2013). Faculty often expressed the need for developmental assistance and technology support due to the
ever-changing forms of technological tools (Roby et al., 2013). Gillett-Swan (2017) explained that the incorporation of technology creates additional work pressure and commitment of time as the instructor seeks the best type of technology to meet the needs of their classroom.

Students have also expressed concerns due to a lack of knowledge in using new technologies (Lim, 2004; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Rabe-Hemp et al, 2009). Chih-Yuan Sun and Rueda (2012) determined that students tend to be more successful in online courses when they are more confident in their technical abilities. Gillett-Swan (2017) suggested that hesitations in using technology can hinder students and prevent them from completing assignments in a specific time frame, especially when time limitations are placed on assessment and brief group work.

**Institutional Concerns.** Although online learning has experienced significant growth, overall faculty acceptance of online courses has remained somewhat stagnant over the years (Allen et al., 2015). According to Allen et al. (2015), the majority of faculty believed that online learners are more difficult to retain than those students who attend face-to-face courses due to the fact that online learners need to have more discipline. Academic leaders reported that an additional challenge of online instruction is due to the additional effort that is required to deliver an online course (Allen et al., 2015). Faculty may be reluctant to teach online because of the additional commitment of time and effort that is required to complete online course development and participate in a virtual environment (Allen et al., 2015; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Major, 2010).

Various scholars have offered research to identify best practices for institutional support of online learning (Angelino et al., 2007; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Meyer, 2014; Seok, 2007; Shea, 2005). In general, these best practices include the same services made available to traditional campus students, including faculty training, student support services, technology
plans, and clear communication of the institutional calendar and processes (Angelino et al., 2007; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Meyer, 2014; Seok, 2007; Shea, 2005). Lundberg and Sheridan (2015) confirmed in their study of online students that a supportive campus environment, which involves positive interactions with faculty and staff as well as a sense of institutional support for success, has a significant effect on student learning (p.13).

**Summary**

In regards to this study, online courses refer to courses in which a large majority of content is delivered through the Internet. While delivery methods vary, research has indicated that the most widely used educational tools involve learning management systems and web-based applications. Over time, instructors have learned to adapt their pedagogical styles to enhance the student experience within their online classroom. Online instructors use both asynchronous and synchronous communication to engage students in classroom activities. Asynchronous learning, implemented by the use of email, discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and lectures, provides the opportunity for higher quantity among discussion participants as well as a higher quality of contributions since students have more time to think and reflect upon their responses (Chen, et al., 2010; Huang & Hsiao, 2012; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Asynchronous learning is easy to use in an online learning environment because it does not require students to communicate during the same time or at the same place. Synchronous learning provides real-time communication, through chat rooms, instant messaging, and web-conferencing, to enhance group collaboration and overall student satisfaction (Huang & Hsiao, 2012).

Research has also provided a better understanding of the challenges associated in adapting to an online learning environment. Since students are not able to attend campus
meetings and directly interact with classmates and faculty members, some feel isolated in the learning process (Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Meyer, 2014; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Wyatt, 2011). Technology has also become a challenge for both students and faculty members, as they must learn new skills to use technology efficiently (Berge, 1998; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Lim, 2004; Roby et al., 2013). Institutions also express concerns that overall faculty acceptance of online learning is still somewhat low because of the perception that teaching online requires more time and effort and online students are more difficult to retain than in a traditional campus environment (Allen et al., 2005). In general, best practices implemented in campus programs, which include faculty training, student support services, technology plans, and clear communications of institutional calendar and processes can also be applied within an online learning environment as well (Angelino et al., 2007; Angelino & Natvig, 2009; Meyer, 2014; Seok, 2007; Shea, 2005).

Factors of Engagement

Major (2015) identified several distinct factors that support the concept of engagement: motivation, attention, involvement, and intellectual effort (p. 209). Gray and DiLoreto (2016) referenced factors of engagement to include attitude, personality, motivation, effort, and self-confidence. Various other researchers declared that engagement involves interaction, motivation, effort, involvement, active learning, and commitment of time (Beer, 2010; Coates, 2007; Dixson, 2010; Hoskins, 2012; Kuh, 2009; Pike & Kuh, 2005; O’Brien et al., 2008; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008; Umbach & Wawrzynksi, 2005). Furthermore, in an effort to enhance engagement within higher education institutions, the National Survey of Student Engagement was built upon five benchmarks of student engagement: level of academic challenge, active learning, student interactions, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus
environment (Carini et al., 2006; Kuh, 2003; Kuh, 2004; Kuh, 2009; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Price & Baker, 2012; Robinson, 2008; Trowler, 2010). For the purpose of this study, various aspects of engagement are organized into four categories: student motivation, attention and related factors, involvement and active learning, and level of academic challenge and intellectual effort. This literature review focuses on each of these four areas associated with student engagement among online learners.

Student Motivation

Motivation has often been associated with engagement because motivation is known to somewhat direct behavior, as it gives an activity its purpose and goal (Beer et al., 2010, p. 76; Lim, 2004; Reeve, 2012). Major (2015) considered motivation as the level of enthusiasm students have for learning and contends that both students and instructors should share the responsibility of motivation within an academic environment. A higher level of motivation should afford a higher level of enthusiasm for learning. Researchers have also implied that motivated learners are more persistent and actively engaged in learning (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Harnett et al. 2011).

For now, the field consists of mostly quantitative case studies pertaining to motivation in online classrooms (Beer, Clark & Jones, 2010; Chen & Jang, 2010; Diemann & Bastiaens, 2010; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Huett, Young, Huett, Moller and Bray, 2008; Kim & Frick, 2011; Kuo, Walker, Schroder & Belland, 2014; Shillingford & Kerlin, 2013; Wang, Shannon & Ross, 2013; Yoo & Huang, 2013). In these quantitative studies, researchers have conducted surveys to determine the level of motivation as it relates to engagement in online coursework (Chen & Jang, 2010; Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda, 2005; Yoo & Haung, 2013; Young & Bruce, 2011). Chen and Jang (2010) established that learner motivation is related to several
aspects of learner success, such as persistence, retention, student success, and course satisfaction. While Chen and Jang (2010) were unable to confirm that motivation predicted learning outcomes, they provided supporting evidence that intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation are reliable constructs in determining the relationship between contextual support, need satisfaction, and motivation among online learners. Scholars have proven the benefits of contextual support through interactions, such as online activities and discussion boards, as they provide an opportunity for greater communication, flexible learning, and enhanced confidence in completing coursework (Chen & Jang, 2010; Chih-Yuan Sun & Rueda, 2005; Harnett et al., 2011; Young & Bruce, 2011).

To understand how motivation is related to engagement, one should consider the basic types of motivation, known as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, and how they relate to various types of engagement within virtual classrooms (Chen & Jang, 2010; Yoo & Huang 2013). Shillingford and Karlin (2013) defined intrinsic motivation as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separate consequence” (p. 92). Schunk and Zimmerman (2012) explained that intrinsic motivation deals with one’s personal interest and enjoyment of a task while extrinsic motivation relates more to external rewards, such as wealth, recognition, and so on. Both are known to affect student motivation, but intrinsic motivation has proven to be more productive in supporting a student’s need for autonomy and overall success in competence and performance (Chen & Jang, 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012).

Yoo and Huang (2013) discovered that intrinsic motivation is also affected by extrinsic motivation, such as rewards offered by employers, and suggested that the ability to relate content to real-life problems is important to adult online learners. Other researchers have suggested that extrinsic motivation can evolve into intrinsic motivation when students are given the opportunity
to participate in activities that allow them to practice specific skills of interest, receive constructive feedback, and avoid demeaning or unnecessary evaluations (Harnett et al., 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). As online learners are typically non-traditional students, they typically pursue their education while working full-time and maintaining family responsibilities. While they juggle so many responsibilities, it is helpful to understand what increases their motivation to pursue and successfully reach their individual goals, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, including their desire to be engaged in their academic coursework. Shillingford and Karlin (2013) reported results from a study to show how participants related the four motivational factors of intrinsic, short-term extrinsic, long-term extrinsic, and willingness to learn new technology. The results of their study established that non-traditional students are more motivated by a desire to demonstrate competence and achieve goals through self-determination than to achieve external rewards such as career advancement (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013, p. 91).

**Attention, Interest, and Self-regulation**

Attention refers to one’s ability to focus on one task (Major, 2015; Keller, 1987; Keller 2010; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016). Keller (1987) included the importance of attention in an instructional design model known as the ARCS Model of Motivational Design. The main concept of this model was based upon four dimensions of motivation that included attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction. He identified attention as an element of motivation and a prerequisite for learning (Keller, 1987). Other researchers agreed and claimed that student attention is a necessary factor of engagement as well (Kim & Frick, 2011; Major, 2015).

Students develop attention by hearing a dramatic statement, relating to an introductory video, a lecture, a loud noise, or even a silent moment. While attention may be easy to obtain, it
is usually the most difficult aspect of engagement to sustain (Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016; O’Brien et al., 2008). O’Brien et al. (2008) explained that attention is based on the judgments that individuals make about the relevance of a task as it relates to their personal interests. If students can relate an assignment or activity on an individual level, then they are more likely to gain interest and maintain attention in completing that task (Lim, 2004; Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016; O’Brien et al., 2008). Hidi and Ainley (2012) stated that “interest plays a central role in focusing attention,” a role that has been well documented in literature for centuries (p. 82). O’Brien et al. (2008) established that engagement is more likely to continue when participants are able to maintain their attention through positive emotions that are triggered by their interest in the activity. In a study conducted by Chih-Yuan and Rueda (2012), results indicated that students who were more interested in their coursework were also more engaged in the learning environment. When attention is triggered by a student’s interest, the student is more likely to develop self-regulatory skills that allow them to maintain engagement throughout coursework (Hidi & Ainley, 2012).

Self-regulated behaviors have become increasingly important for online learning as they must develop behaviors to engage in various course requirements without the reinforcement of synchronous meetings (Kuo et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013). Reeve, Ryan, Deci, and Jang (2012) defined self-regulation as a “process in which people organize and manage their capacities- that is, their thoughts, emotions, behaviors, and social-contextual surroundings- in the service of attaining some desired future state” (p. 223). Similarly, other researchers define it as an “active and constructive process that involves the student’s active, goal-directed, self-control of behaviors, motivation, and cognition for academic tasks” in which the activities build personal and contextual attributes to reach optimal performance (Wang et al., 2013). Kuo et al. (2014)
further explained that self-regulated learners are self-motivated, seek help from others, and are willing to take responsibility for their success and failures (p. 37). Self-regulation is especially important to the success of distance learners as they are required to monitor their time commitment as they complete coursework, along with other responsibilities at home and at work.

Sansone, Fraughton, Zachary, Butner, and Heiner (2011) stated, “Successful online students must learn and maintain motivation to learn” as they typically hold sole responsibility of their engagement involving online content (p. 199). Several quantitative studies have confirmed that self-regulated learning serves as a reliable predictor of course satisfaction and performance (Kuo et al., 2014; Sansone et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013). Furthermore, one study indicated that by using proper learning strategies, students increase levels of motivation and self-regulation behaviors that in turn leads to higher course satisfaction and better performance (Wang et al., 2013). Sansone et al. (2011) suggested “interventions to make students more motivated to learn the material may thus depend on whether and how goals-defined motivation enhances, detracts from, or has no effect on, the experience” (p. 202). The authors further recommend that online instructors develop a well-designed online environment that includes activities for reflection and collaboration with peers that promote self-regulated learning strategies and include interesting links and assignments that allows online students to apply concepts to their personal interests (Kim & Frick, 2011; Kuo et al., 2014; Sansone et al., 2011; Wang et al., 2013). While convenience and flexibility of online education greatly affected a learner’s motivation for online learning, students also appreciate a social presence that allows for interaction with faculty and peers (Kim & Frick, 2011).

**Involvement and Active Learning**

In 1984, Alexander Astin proposed a theory of student involvement that described an
involved student as one that devotes a considerable amount of energy to academics, spends much
time on campus, participates in various student organization and activities, and interacts often
with faculty and students (p. 292). He further elaborated that, “student involvement refers to the
quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college
experience” (Astin, 1999, p. 528). He went on to state that activities might include academic
work, extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and others (Astin, 1999). In more
recent work, authors have described involvement as how much time and energy is spent on the
task at hand (Beer et al., 2010; Major, 2015). Tinto (1997) referred to involvement as being one
and the same with engagement and one of the most reliable predictors of student success within
higher education. He held that students are more likely to succeed in college if they are more
academically and socially engaged in educational activities (Tinto, 2012).

Kuh et al. (2005) expressed the importance of active and collaborative learning within the
classroom, stating that students learn more when they are able to think about and apply what they
are learning in various settings. Within an online classroom, students can participate in active
learning with their instructors and peers through activities such as class discussions,
presentations, group collaboration, or reflective writing (Beer et al., 2010; Kuh et al., 2005;
confirmed that interaction among students and direct communication with faculty contributed to
students’ involvement in the class and enhanced the overall learning experience.

While many researchers have conducted studies that support Alexander Astin’s theory,
most of the identified research involved traditional students who attended college campuses and
failed to include non-traditional learners who commuted to campus or attended evening and
online classes (Price & Baker, 2012). In earlier definitions of involvement, scholars described the
term as physical participation in student organizations, attendance of campus events, and direct interaction with faculty and peers (Astin, 1984, Astin 1999, Price & Baker, 2012). Various researchers have concluded that online learners are typically older and maintain at least part-time enrollments while pursuing their academic studies (Angelino, 2007; Beer et al., 2010; Fisher, 2010; Higher Education.com & BestColleges.com, 2016; Park & Choi, 2009). Price and Baker (2012) questioned the usefulness of the NSSE as a measure of adult students’ engagement as they discovered that adult learners scored significantly lower on the survey items compared to traditional students. The authors suggest the results are related to the different motivations of adult learners and their desire to gain new skills and knowledge rather than to create social relationships (Price & Baker, 2012).

**Level of Academic Challenge and Intellectual Effort**

The level of academic challenge within a course can usually be determined by the amount of intellectual effort that a student puts forth in a course (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). The NSSE has measured this aspect by calculated time or effort put into studying, reading, writing, and preparing for class activities or assessments (Kuh, 2009; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). Major (2015) explained that intellectual effort also involves a process in which a student progresses from simply reading content to learning and understanding the concept. Researchers have proven that learning outcomes for online learners are equivalent in comparison to students attending class on a college campus (Collins & Pascarella, 2003; Rovai & Barnum, 2003). Rabe-Hemp et al. (2009) revealed significant differences in perception of academic challenge in their study that involved a comparison of responses from students enrolled in a traditional campus course versus students in an online course. Although student grades were similar, students in the online courses reported more hours of class preparation time and higher levels of class
participation and contact with the instructor (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009).

Researchers have agreed that the asynchronous style of online learning provides students with the opportunity to be more reflective and thoughtful in completing academic assignments and activities (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Robinson & Hullinger, 2008). In Lundberg and Seridan’s (2015) study, they noticed that students worked harder than expected to meet the expectations of the faculty. As a result, the students achieved increased measures of learning, including general education, practical competence, and personal development (Lundberg & Seridan, 2015, p. 13). Robinson and Hullinger (2008) found that online students were most engaged in analytical work, but least involved in synthesizing and organizing ideas and concepts. In addition, the level of academic challenge may be affected by students’ technical skills when adapting to required technologies (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009). A student’s difficulty in using required software or accessing specific technology might affect their ability to complete coursework and interact in other classroom activities.

Summary

Though many factors are associated with engagement, this section focused on four main categories: student motivation, attention and related factors, involvement and active learning, and level of academic challenge and intellectual effort. Many researchers have studied motivation within online classrooms to determine how motivation is directly related to engagement (Beer et al., 2010; Chen & Jang, 2010; Diemann & Bastiaens, 2010; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Huett et al., 2008; Kim & Frick, 2011; Kuo et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2013; Shillingford & Kerlin, 2013; Yoo & Huang, 2013). These quantitative studies have mostly used surveys to determine the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of students pursuing online degrees (Chen & Jang, 2010; Harnett et al., 2011; Shillingford & Kerlin, 2013; Yoo & Huang 2013). Other studies
focused on aspects of attention and interest in coursework, as they concluded that the two behaviors are necessary to maintain engagement throughout the learning experience (Lim, 2004; Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016; O’Brien et al., 2008). Researchers have confirmed that interaction among students and direct communication with faculty contributes to students’ involvement in the class and enhances the overall learning experience (Beer et al., 2010; Kuh et al., 2005; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Price & Baker, 2012). While various studies have proven that learning outcomes for online learning or similar to that of traditional campus students; however, researchers have revealed that online students likely spend more hours of class preparation in comparison (Collins & Pascarella, 2003; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Rovai & Barnum, 2003). Few studies were acquired that confirmed whether online students perceive a higher level of academic challenge or intellectual effort than traditional campus students.

Theoretical Frameworks

Various theoretical frameworks have been used to research student engagement in online learning. However, none fit the purpose of my study. For this reason, I used Grounded Theory to frame my dissertation study. This section of the literature review described various theories and related frameworks that have been used in the research of online learning.

Theories of Engagement

Kember’s (1995) Model of Student Progress. One of the earliest models specifically established for distance education was David Kember’s model of student progress for open learning. Kember’s model focused on adult learners who were studying at a distance and most likely juggling additional demands of work, family, and other commitments (Woodley, Lange & Tanewski, 2001). Kember’s model was based upon the argument that students enter academia with a predetermined set of personal traits that will guide them down one of two tracks, either
positive or negative. Students who possess positive traits, such as work experience, or prior education, will likely have a positive experience that allows them to integrate both socially and academically within their academic and personal environments. Those students who have negative traits will likely be more challenged to succeed and face continued challenges in the pursuit of their education. Kember identified social integration, academic integration, external attribution, and academic incompatibility as four elements of student progress (Lint, 2013).

In this model, persistence was measured by the student’s enrollment in the upcoming academic term. Social integration referred to the support of the student’s employer, family, and friends to persist in their academic goals, while external attribution referred to aspects of the student’s life, which may include lack of time, support, and unexpected life events (Lint, 2013). Academic integration involved all aspects of involvement with the academic institution. Academic Incompatibility was described as the student’s inability to receive a passing grade in the course (Lint, 2013).

Woodley et al. (2001) repeated Kember’s original work using the same questionnaire and techniques on a group of business school students enrolled at the Open University of the United Kingdom. However, they did not find results of their study to be consistent with the findings of Kember, showing weaknesses in Kember’s Distance Education Student Progress (DESP) inventory. The DESP inventory uses a five-point Likert scale survey to focus on the four factors of social integration, academic integration, external attribution, and academic compatibility (Kember, 1995; Lint, 2013). In 2013, Lint applied the DESP survey to study online students enrolled at a community college in Maryland. Lint (2013) found that external attribution and academic integration were significant factors that affected student persistence in online learning.

**The Engagement Theory.** The Engagement Theory, introduced by Kearsley and
Shneiderman (1998), provided a framework for technology-based learning and teaching. The Engagement Theory was developed with the foundational understanding that “students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p. 20) to achieve an optimal learning experience. The foundation of their work was also built upon the opinion that technology can support engagement in ways that traditional learning styles cannot (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998). The authors supported collaborative work by creating learning activities that occur in a group context, are project-based, and have an authentic or meaningful focus. They established three components (Relate, Create, and Donate) to practice this framework. The related component focused on team involvement through proper communication, planning, and social interaction. Students are encouraged to make learning a creative and purposeful experience during the create component. During the donate component, students should be able to make a valuable contribution to their environment with a well-stated purpose that can be applied in a real-life situation.

O’Brien et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative study to deconstruct the term engagement as it applied to student experiences using technology. As a result of their findings, O’Brien et al. (2008) developed a new definition of engagement, along with a conceptual framework, that characterized the term as a process that involved four distinct stages: point of engagement, period of sustained engagement, disengagement, and reengagement. In comparison to other research studies, they discovered that their findings were related to that of Kearsley and Scheiderman’s theory due to the fact that participants expressed a need for self-directed, meaningful involvement based upon some level of challenge or motivation to fulfill personal interest and external incentives to complete tasks (O’Brien et al., 2008).

To gain student perceptions regarding relevance of the engagement theory as it related to
a group project, Miliszewska and Horwood (2006) conducted a study that involved computer
science students from Australia and Hong Kong. While all students deemed the project work to
be a valuable learning experience, researchers were surprised to learn that the donate aspect of
the Engagement Theory was not perceived to be as important, or even applicable, to both
populations of students (Miliszewska & Horwood, 2006). The researchers expressed concern
with this finding since employers tend to place more value on graduates who have prior “real-
life” experience (Miliszewska & Horwood, 2006, 161).

**Kuh (2001, 2009) Engagement Model.** Kuh is known for his work in student
engagement, but most specifically for his role in developing the National Survey of Student
Engagement (NSSE). The survey provided the ability for the National Center for Public Policy
and Higher Education to release a national report known as the National Benchmarks for
Educational Practice and later, The College Student Report. Through these efforts, various
educators and academic organizations collaborated to develop an assessment to determine how
well institutions supported student learning and quality educational practices enhance student
engagement (Kuh, 2003). Kuh’s premise of engagement simply states, “The more students study
a subject, the more they learn about it. Likewise, the more students practice and get feedback on
their writing, analyzing, or problem solved, the more adept they become” (p. 25). Kuh also stated
that institutions were also responsible for supporting student engagement by providing engaging
activities and quality instruction (Kuh, 2003; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015).

Studies applying Kuh’s Engagement Model have focused on traditional students who
attend college on campus (Lundberg & Seridan, 2015). Lundberg and Seridan (2015) sought to
determine how engagement with faculty and peers contributes to learning with an online
environment. Their study included over 800 full-time students, in their senior year of college,
enrolled at a public institution. A quantitative survey was created to measure student-reported gains in general education, personal development, and practical competence as it related to student faculty interaction, engagement with diverse others, and student academic effort (p. 11). Lundberg and Seridan (2015) discovered that institutional support was the strongest predictor for each of the three learning domains. Furthermore, frequency of interaction with faculty resulted in personal development, but did not predict gains in general education or practical competence. The authors described a supported environment as one that included positive interactions with faculty, staff, and students and a sense that the institution sought to provide support and resources to enhance their experience (Lundberg & Seridan, 2015, p. 13).

Other researchers have used Kuh’s conceptual framework and NSSE data to investigate the nature of student engagement in the online learning environment as it related to the use of learning technologies (Chen et al., 2010; Nelson Laird & Kuh, 2005). Chen et al. (2010) included students who were enrolled in both hybrid and online courses. However, both groups indicated a positive correlation between the use of the technology and measures of engagement, indicating that the use of learning technology is useful within the realm of student engagement (Chen et al., 2010, p. 1230). Nelson Laird and Kuh (2005) also confirmed a positive relationship between the use of technology and student engagement, especially in regards to active and collaborative learning.

**Theories of Motivation**

Although motivation is just one factor related to engagement, many researchers have used motivation theories to explore student engagement in online learning environments (Chen & Jang, 2010; deNoyless et al., 2014; Garrison, 2007; Harnett et al., 2011; Kim & Frick, 2011; Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Reeve, 2012; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013; Chih-Yuan Sun & Reuda,
The following motivational theories have been most often referenced in the research conducted for this study.

**Self-Determination Theory.** Self-Determination Theory (SDT), developed by researchers Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan (1985), is a motivational theory that focuses upon three basic psychological needs: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Deci and Ryan stated that intrinsically motivated students, who maintain more autonomous behaviors, tend to engage more actively than those who are more extrinsically motivated by recognition of instructors or grade assessments (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Lee & Hannafin, 2016). Shillingford and Karlin (2013) defined intrinsic motivation as “the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separate consequence” (p. 92). Schunk and Zimmerman (2012) explained that intrinsic motivation deals with one’s personal interest and enjoyment of a task while extrinsic motivation relates more to external rewards, such as wealth, recognition, and so on. Both are known to affect student motivation, but intrinsic motivation has proven to be more productive in supporting a student’s need for autonomy and overall success in competence and performance (Chen & Jang, 2010; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2012).

Yoo and Huang (2013) conducted a quantitative study that supports the two levels of extrinsic motivation, in which adult learners need to apply what they learn in solving real-life problems. Another study found that students are intrinsically motivated when they are given the opportunity to participate in activities that allow them to use specific skills and interests, receive constructive feedback, and avoid demeaning or unnecessary evaluations (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Because online learners are typically non-traditional and working students, it is important to understand what increases their motivation to pursue and successfully reach their individual goals. Shillingford and Karlin (2013) observed that participants displayed the four motivational
factors of intrinsic, short-term extrinsic, long-term extrinsic, and willingness to learn new technology and apply findings to determine the benefits to distance learning programs.

While few research studies have been conducted to determine how the self-determination framework directly relates to engagement, various scholars have use the framework to develop strategies for framework development and practice within a classroom environment (Beffa-Negrini, 2002; Cohen, Miller, Chen & Jang, 2010; Lee & Hannafin, 2016; Reeve, 2012; Sibold, 2016). Harnett, St. George, and Dron (2011) used this model to explore if learners were more engaged by intrinsic or extrinsic motivations. They learned that students were engaged by a variety of motivations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, and one was not more prevalent than the other (Harnett et al., 2011).

**Community of Inquiry.** In 2000, D. R. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer first established a comprehensive framework known as Community of Inquiry (CoI) as an online learning research tool (Garrison, 2007). By applying a constructivist approach to learning, this framework uses three elements, social, cognitive, and teaching presence, to provide helpful insights for understanding online learning (Dixson, 2015; Garrison, 2007; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). Meyer (2014) referred to this framework as one of the most frequently used when researching engagement in online learning.

These elements likely overlap when institutions provide additional components to set the necessary climate, support discourse through activities and resources, and select content relevant to the learning experience. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) emphasized the importance of community in developing a learning experience in which teachers and learners are engaged as real people who can think critically, create meaning, and discuss within their learning environment. deNoyelles et al. (2014) presented strategies to create meaningful discussion and
student engagement through the use of online asynchronous discussion boards. They encouraged instructors to model social presence by being more personal and providing prompt feedback or encouragement. In addition, they suggested that instruction use a variety of techniques to enhance critical thinking and peer facilitation (deNoyelles et al., 2014).

Aykol and Garrison (2008) used a CoI survey instrument to analyze an online discussion, using many of the techniques introduced my deNoyelles et al., (2014), in order to determine the relationships of the three elements as they related to student learning and satisfaction. The researchers revealed that students who perceived higher levels of teaching presence also indicated higher levels of cognitive presence, learning, and satisfaction (Aykol & Garrison, 2008). While social presence showed little impact on learning, it did have somewhat of a positive effect on student satisfaction (Aykol & Garrison, 2008). Cho and Tobias (2016) also used this framework to compare learning experiences among three different sections that included a discussion thread requirement. In one section, no discussion involvement was required for the course. In the other two sections, a discussion thread was added as a component of the course, but one section included participation of the instructor. Like Aykol and Garrison (2008), Cho and Tobias (2016) also found that interaction with the instructor is a very important factor in developing a student’s social presence within an online learning community. As mentioned by deNoyelles et al. (2014), Cho and Tobias (2016) also learned that timely feedback from instructors is considered to be vital in building an online community.

Keller’s ARCS Model of Motivational Design. The ARCS Model was created by John M. Keller in the early 1980s and was developed to find “more effective ways of understanding the major influences on the motivation to learn, and for systematic ways of identifying and solving problems with learning motivation” (Keller, 1987, p. 2). Based upon theories of
motivation and instructional design, it applied the expectancy-value theory that assumes that students are more likely to engage in an activity if it provides personal satisfaction and positive probability for success (Keller, 1987). Keller sought to develop a process (see Table 2.1) that others could follow in creating instruction that is appealing and will enhance a student’s willingness to learn. The model identified four specific conditions that must be achieved for students to become motivated and includes systematic processes to guide instructors as they develop content.

Table 2.1  Keller’s ARCS Model of Motivational Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARCS Model Categories, Definitions and Process Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Major Categories</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
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(Keller, 2010)

The ARCS model described four key conditions of Attention, Relevance, Confidence and Satisfaction. Keller identifies *attention* as an element of motivation and a prerequisite for learning. During this stage, it is helpful for instructors to respond to the needs and concerns of students while encouraging them to engage more in the topic but not overwhelming them with too much information so that they disconnect with the content at some point (Keller, 1987; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016). The second condition, known as *relevance*, is important to connect the student with content that seems applicable to present situations or future career opportunities (Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010, Milman & Wessmiller, 2016). This aspect is especially important for adult learners who tend to be more concerned with the application of their courses
to their ultimate career goals (Milman & Wessmiller, 2016). **Confidence** is very influential in a student’s persistence and ability for success. By nature, some individuals are more confident than others that success can be accomplished. A fear of failure may prevent students from believing that they can complete the task at hand (Keller, 1987; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016). The last category of **Satisfaction** uses research and practices to ensure that students can feel good about the work they have completed (Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010).

The ARCS Model of Motivational Design can be a beneficial tool in development and assessing course activities because it provides a problem-solving, practical approach founded on theory and research (Keller, 2010). By building engaging activities and providing useful feedback, instructional designers and faculty members can greatly enhance the likeliness of student success. (Beffa-Negrini et al, 2002). However, as Keller (2010) noted, the model does have limitations. Not all instructors sense the responsibility of motivating their students. Faculty members who assume some responsibility for motivating their students to engage within their classroom best implements the model (Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002; Keller, 2010). Students ultimately choose whether to commit to completing assignments and tasks. Beffa-Negrini et al. (2002) recommend the use of the ARCS Model with the understanding that assessment and adjustments should be made often as student cohorts and behaviors may change often as well. They suggest that instructors model respectful and clear online communication while also drawing attention to community building so that students will avoid isolation and have increased satisfaction within the learning experience (Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002).

**Summary**

The theoretical frameworks mentioned in this section provided the helpful insights in understanding and improving online education. Kember’s (1995) Model of Student Progress laid
the foundation to show the importance of knowing students traits and how they affect a student’s ability to progress through social integration and academic integration needed to obtain student success. The Engagement Theory, introduced in 1998 by Kearsley and Shneidermann, introduced the significance of using technology to develop engaging learning activities through collaborative work within an online classroom. The Engagement Theory framework, although not well researched in the field, was used by O’Brien et al (2008) to develop a new definition of engagement within an online environment. Kuh’s Engagement Model (2006), was initially conceived with a main focus of traditional campus students. Additional researchers have applied the same concepts, which involve student behaviors, peer involvement, interaction with faculty and motivation, within online learning environments. Among the research that I acquired, the majority of studies applied motivational theories to explore student engagement in online learning environments. Theories and models, such Self-Determination Theory, Community of Inquiry, and ARCS Model of Motivational Design, have been used to build engaging courses by implementing activities that motivate students to succeed throughout their learning experience.

While the application of these theories have provided great insights, I wanted to determine if more can be learned by conducting a qualitative study that is not restricted by previously introduced theoretical frameworks. Over the past decade online, online education has grown significantly. By using grounded theory, I was able to analyze students’ perceptions and stories to determine if a new theory could be developed through their insights. While grounded theory is well known within research, my literature review yielded very few studies using grounded theory to study engagement in online education.
Summary of Literature Review

This chapter provided a review of the various types of pedagogy used with online learning along with the challenges of teaching in an online environment. As noted, while there are many aspects of engagement, several are most apparent with the behavior of online learners. Academic scholars have provided the field with a great deal of research in regards to the engagement of college students, but a limited number of studies have focused solely on the engagement of online learners. Quantitative studies, including surveys that produced informative reports, have been helpful in providing an overview of the growth of online learning. Other scholars have provided pedagogical frameworks and course development tools to assist faculty in creating quality online courses that are perceived by academia to be engaging. However, few qualitative studies have been provided to determine how online learners are engaged in the college experience just as we seek to engage traditional college students. The field would benefit by additional qualitative research that provides an understanding of how student engagement is perceived by students currently enrolled in online learning. By understanding how online students are engaged in online courses, educational institutions can better determine what is needed to better serve this growing population.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

In Chapter 3, I provide an overview of the proposed research methodology and methods for this dissertation study. The purpose of this study was to identify online students’ perceptions of engagement in an online learning environment. By conducting a qualitative case study, I used a constructivist grounded theory approach to define student engagement as it applies to online coursework. Twenty currently enrolled online students were interviewed via distance using Blackboard Collaborate, a technology made available within their online course shell. Participants’ interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then reviewed by the participant to ensure that the students’ viewpoints were accurately recorded and understood. The rationale for selecting this particular research approach and participants is discussed in this chapter. This chapter presents how I conducted the research and used methods for data collection and analysis. I also present ethical considerations, quality assurance, and my positionality in the study.

Research Approach

I conducted a qualitative research study, one in which Creswell (2009) described as a type of research that seeks to understand meanings held by individuals or groups involved in a social or human problem (p. 4). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) defined qualitative research as “social research that is aimed at investigating the way in which people make sense of their ideas and experience” (p. 11). My desire to understand individual meanings and perceptions of students prompted my qualitative research. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with students individually and discuss their experiences within academia. I argue that much can be learned
through explanations and stories provided in qualitative research that is more difficult to obtain in quantitative studies. Quantitative research uses data to test a pre-determined hypothesis by determining a relationship between multiple variables (Creswell, 2009). Developing surveys, restricted to a limited number of responses would have hindered the student in sharing important aspects of their experiences, intruding the foundation purpose of this study.

Furthermore, as a constructivist, I believe that individuals construct their own knowledge based on their personal experiences (Creswell, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). To understand the perceptions of online learners, I sought to learn how they defined engagement within a virtual environment. One cannot assume that student engagement means the same to online learners as it does to traditional campus students. As confirmed in this study, I believed that participants’ perceptions and understandings would be different and complex in comparison (Creswell, 2009). Online learners are different than traditional campus students in many aspects. As mentioned in previous chapters, students enrolled in online programs are typically older and complete coursework from various locations while also maintaining full-time employment or family responsibilities. In applying the constructivist world view, I sought to learn how their backgrounds and previous experiences established their understanding and desire to engage in online coursework and interact with others involved in the educational experience (Creswell, 2009). As individuals live their own realities based upon personal experience, I wanted to obtain more specific details based upon their personal opinions and perceptions (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

I used constructivist grounded theory as an approach to guide my research. Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory was described as a process of gathering data to develop theory through inductive reasoning of data rather than by testing hypotheses based upon
existing theories (Charmaz, 2014; Glesne, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). A grounded theory approach provides flexible guidelines that allow the researcher to collect and analyze data simultaneously to compare dates and develop themes that are derived directly from the data (Charmaz, 2014). I agree with Charmaz (2014) as she stated “we are part of the world we study, the data we collect, and the analyses we produce” and grounded theory allows us to use our own experiences along with those of others to construct our own theories of understanding (p. 17).

**Research Design**

I conducted a study based upon grounded theory in which students responded to qualitative semi-structured interview questions. Their responses were analyzed to identify common themes that defined engagement and described aspects of online learning that they felt to be engaging. By applying grounded theory through means of a case study, I conducted a specialized study that involved students enrolled in one specific course within a single academic department of a large research university, with a strong undergraduate culture, to generalize for other studies that include additional programs or larger units (Gerry, 2004). I conducted a case study because case studies are bounded by time or certain activities that allow the researcher to focus on a specific group or process (Creswell, 2009; Glesne, 2011; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Conducting a qualitative study in this manner allowed me to analyze students’ experiences for similarities by being in a specific course within the same institution. I did not assume that students in other classes or at different institutions are having the same experiences as students interviewed for this study. Specific boundaries allowed me to determine whether levels of engagement differed based upon individual perceptions of student engagement within this smaller student population. Furthermore, this population was bounded by enrollment within one academic college. Participants had earned either junior or senior level class status, which
confirmed that they have had some previous collegiate experience. While participants are all enrolled in the same course, students were pursuing a variety of majors and career goals.

Data collection consisted of interviews, which Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) described as an interaction between the interviewer and interviewee that includes “a conversation that has a structure and a purpose” (p. 3). There are basically three types of interviews: structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Salmons, 2015; Savin-Badin & Major, 2013). Instead of following a strictly structured protocol, I conducted semi-structured interviews that included several preset questions along with additional questions to clarify or gain additional information in response to participants’ comments and reactions (Glesne, 2011; Salmons, 2015; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The questions, asked of each participant, were used to determine how students perceived course content, interactions with classmates, and teacher accessibility to be relevant to their engagement within online classes. I also asked additional questions that related to personal experiences. As recommended by several researchers, I created several open-ended questions that allowed interviewees to share their individual perspectives (Charmaz, 2014; Glesne, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Charmaz (2014) explained that intensive interviewing, which allows for “open-ended but direct conversation,” is especially fitting for grounded theory because it provided the ability for the participants to share their individual insights and viewpoints (p. 85).

**Research Questions**

The research questions were designed to define student engagement, as perceived by online learning students, and identify aspects of online learning that students find to be engaging and challenging. This qualitative case study focused on three central questions:

(a) How do online students define engagement in online coursework?
(b) What aspects of online learning do students perceive to be engaging?

(c) What are the challenges to engagement online?

Site Selection

I conducted research at a large public university because this specific institution and academic college has administered online degree programs for over a decade now. The institution, a traditional brick and mortar university, is nationally ranked. I have been affiliated with this specific institution for over a decade as well. The College is dedicated to constantly improving the quality of their online degree programs. When approached, administration was excited and appreciative of being included in the study.

GES 300, Issues in General Studies, a three-credit-hour semester course, was required of all students majoring within an undergraduate program offered by the College of General Studies (CGS) at Southern College. GES 300 discussed the history and philosophy of the college as well as the present and future issues within society that likely affect implication within the profession. The course was required to be completed during the student’s junior or senior year and was offered as both a traditional campus course and an online course. The online version of the course was offered through the University’s learning management system. The content of the course was organized by learning modules, which can be completed according to a class schedule that spans over a 15-week semester. A list of topics covered in the learning modules follows:

Table 3.1  Learning Module Topics of GES 300: Issues in General Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Module 1</th>
<th>Career Exploration</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Module 2</td>
<td>Discovering your Strengths</td>
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<td>Module 3</td>
<td>Resuming Building</td>
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<td>Module 4</td>
<td>Current Career Trends</td>
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<td>Module 5</td>
<td>Social Media and the Job Search</td>
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<tr>
<td>Module 6</td>
<td>Using Technology to Build Skill Set</td>
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Approximately 50 – 60 students enroll in this course during a typical Fall or Spring semester. Specific class sections are restricted to distance students only to ensure that traditional campus students are enrolled in a campus section of the course. Student capacity is typically limited to 30 students or less per each online section.

This course was especially appropriate for this study because all majors within this college are required to complete GES 300 to earn their baccalaureate degree. Bounding the study by one course provided the ability to confirm that participants are receiving the same course content through the same type of course delivery. Due to the nature of this course, it also provided the opportunity to obtain a more diverse understanding of perceptions since participants include a variety of students enrolled in one of several majors offered by the academic college.

**Subject Selection**

The participants for this study included undergraduate students and instructors who participated in one of three online sections of GES 300: Issues in General Studies. The course is required course of all eight different undergraduate majors of the College of General Studies (CGS). Prerequisites for this course require students to have previously completed at least 31 hours of coursework. This restriction allowed me to confirm prior experience in higher education.

**Instructors of GES 300**

The instructors of this course included three adjunct faculty members with several years of experience in teaching and administrative responsibilities within higher education. I felt that it
was important to include personal insights from each instructor to properly understand the structure of the course and the instructors’ effort to engage students within the online course environment.

Each of the three instructors was contacted by email to request their participation in the study. Instructors were also asked to participate in a recorded video interview that included only five brief questions regarding their experience in teaching this online course. In addition, they were asked to forward the student recruitment email to all students who were enrolled in the restricted section of distance learners pursuing an online degree program. All three instructors thoughtfully forwarded the recruitment email as requested. Although all initially agreed to participate in a video-recorded interview, none were able due to personal and professional conflicts. Instead, all instructors were sent an email that included the five-question protocol. Instructors returned their responses by email and their helpful insights were included in the study. A brief list of instructors is included in Table 3.2 below:

Table 3.2  Online Instructors of GES 300

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Faculty Status</th>
<th>Experience Teaching Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Roberts</td>
<td>Adjunct Instructor</td>
<td>More than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>Adjunct Instructor</td>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams</td>
<td>Adjunct Instructor</td>
<td>More than 10 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Undergraduate Students**

These online students were enrolled in one of eight different undergraduate majors. I only included online undergraduate students this study because I wanted limit this population to students who were involved in baccalaureate degree programs through one academic college to provide distinct boundaries for this case study. By choosing this course, I was able to include
students majoring in various disciplines to allow for diversity in academic interests, experiences, and career goals.

Potential student participants were sought by their enrollment in this junior-level course and recruited by email sent by the instructor of the course section that the student was currently enrolled. Participants were asked to respond to the recruitment email to state their interest of participation in the study. Interested students responded by sending an email to my personal student account. Direct communication avoided additional commitment from the instructor and removed any perception of obligation to the instructor of the course. Instructors were asked to send the email to students who were enrolled in online undergraduate degree programs only. However, due to difficulty in limiting students through email, all three instructors sent the recruitment email to all students enrolled in the online sections of GES 300. This population included both traditional campus students and distance learners who registered for the online sections of this specific course.

Unfortunately, after the first email was sent in early October, no interest was received in the first two weeks of recruitment. Upon recommendation of administration and the online instructors of the course, I sought IRB approval to offer an incentive to participants upon completion of online interview. The instructors of each course sent a second recruitment email. On the following day, I received numerous emails from student participants. Twenty-eight students replied to the second recruitment email that included an incentive of a $20 amazon gift card to complete the online interview. Students were asked to schedule a 30-45 minute interview at a time of their convenience within the current semester. However, eight students did not reply to schedule a time to conduct the video interview. A total of 20 completed the video interview and were included in the study.
During one of the first scheduled interviews, I learned that one participant was actually a campus student who chose to register for the online section of the course. At that moment, I realized that recruitment emails were sent to both traditional and distance learners. To keep my commitment to other campus students who had scheduled an online interview, I decided to include a maximum of five campus students in the participant pool. The remaining fifteen students were restricted to distance learners who were pursuing degrees through online programs. Early in the process, I was able to confirm student status in the response emails that was used to schedule interview appointments.

Demographically, student participants represented a diverse population. The following table lists the five campus students who choose to complete an online course during this specific semester. All traditional main campus students (MA) were non-married individuals between the ages of 19-25. All but one of the participants maintains at least part-time employment while pursuing a full-time course load. The majority of campus student participants attended additional classes on campus this semester, with the exception of Sally. Sally was completing a required internship in another state during this specific term. She completed one online course in addition to her nine-hour internship. A brief demographic list of main campus participants is listed below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>MA/DL</th>
<th>JR/SR</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jay</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 - 25</td>
<td>off-campus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to the 5 main campus students, 15 distance learners participated in the study. These participants included students who were single, married, and/or parents between the ages of 19
and 45. The majority of this population maintains both employment and family responsibilities while pursuing full-time student enrollment. A brief demographic list of distance student participants is listed in Table 3.4.

### Table 3.4 Distance Learner (DL) Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>MA/DL</th>
<th>JR/SR</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19 – 25</td>
<td>In-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>36 – 45</td>
<td>In-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cassie</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>36 – 45</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 45</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>In-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacey</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>In-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>19 – 25</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 – 25</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>36 – 45</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>SR</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>19 – 25</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>DL</td>
<td>JR</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26 – 35</td>
<td>Out-of-state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Data Collection Procedures

In this qualitative case study, I used semi-structured interviews in which all student participants were asked questions from a pre-established questionnaire. Due to the location of student participants, video-recorded interviews were conducted using Collaborate, a software tool made available free of charge through their student account within the University’s course management system. Participation required a video-recorded interview to ensure accuracy and the ability to gain visual cues portrayed through body language or facial expressions. Salmons (2015) considers interview research as “arguably the most personal form of data collection” (p. xvi) and describes online interviews as a convenient way to include participants who are located...
all over the world. Each interview lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. Audio recordings were saved on my password-protected personal computer until the transcription was completed and saved appropriately. Once the recording was transcribed and approved by the participant, the audio recording was deleted. Only one interview was conducted with each of the twenty student participants. Participants were not asked for a second interview but were contacted by email and asked to review their transcribed interview to approve or clarify their responses. Physical data, while limited, included handwritten memos taken during the interview and printed transcripts that were coded for analysis. Physical data were kept in a locked file cabinet in my individual office. Physical and digital data were labeled using pseudonyms, either chosen by the participant or assigned by me.

**Delimitations**

In this case study, I chose to set specific boundaries for this study. The first delimitation involves the decision to focus on students’ perception of engagement in online courses rather than on faculty perceptions of engagement. In my review of literature, I discovered that the field was lacking of rich descriptions from a student’s perspective. I decided to include only undergraduate students because they currently represent the largest percentage of online student enrollment (Seaman et al., 2018). Furthermore, I chose to interview online students enrolled in one specific course offered by one academic department at a single public university in order to limit data and generalize findings more efficiently. By conducting a bounded case study, I hoped to provide a study that could be easily duplicated within various other online environments.

Due to the various locations of the participants, students were asked to conduct interviews using certain technology that allowed both the interview and the interviewees to see and hear each other during the interviews. I sought to conduct video interviews for several
reasons. First of all, I wanted to engage with students on an individual level through verbal and visual interaction. I wanted students to feel comfortable in speaking with me and I also wanted to read their facial cues and body language as they responded to each question. Secondly, video-recorded interviews allowed me to record the interviews and save them accordingly so that I could review them as needed to complete interview transcriptions. Finally, I wanted to learn how students interacted using technology that was also offered in their online courses.

In order to provide detailed reflections of students’ responses, I implemented a constructivist grounded theory approach to research so that findings would be a direct representation of the data offered by the participants. I dismissed any previous theories used in researching engagement in online learning to provide an honest and fresh representation of this specific qualitative study.

**Limitations**

Certain limitations of the study should also be considered. Participants were recruited due to their current enrollment in one single course. The course included a variety of majors with very diverse backgrounds and current lifestyles. The population was limited to very small representation of online learners worldwide. Furthermore, while their instructor recruited students to participate in the study, students were also given a $20 gift card upon completion of the interview. Data obtained through these personal student responses were limited by the thoughtfulness, truthfulness, and quantity of information that each participant was willing to provide.

Interviews were conducted during a span of approximately two months in one single semester. By conducting the interviews in the middle of a semester, reflections may not include
final thoughts and experiences for the course in its entirety. At this point in the semester, students had not yet completed all assignments or earned a final grade for the course.

Finally, interviews were conducted using one single technology tool for all encounters. Participants were asked to download the tool and become familiar with using it before conducting the interview. Although some interviews did include technical difficulties, we cannot know if experiences would have differed if another type of technology was used. Also, the time length of interviews varied from 30 minutes to 48 minutes, depending on the availability of the participant. The quantity and quality of information provided varies based upon each participant’s willingness and technical ability to share their experiences.

Data Analysis

Video-recorded interviews were transcribed to ensure accurate representation of students’ responses (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). After the transcription was completed, I reviewed the video recording along with the completed transcript to confirm precision of comments. I typed transcriptions and stored them on my personal computer. To assist me in the coding process, I uploaded transcripts into a research data-analysis software program called MAXQDA. I read completed transcripts once again but also initiated an initial coding process. Charmaz (2014) held that coding within grounded theory requires at least two main phases: initial coding and focused coding. During this initial process, I recorded keywords and phrases to various pieces of text, mostly on a line-by-line basis (Charmaz, 2014; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Saldaña, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I read each transcript individually and used open coding, also referred to as initial coding, to identify initial descriptions or themes and begin organizing data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Saldaña, 2016; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Initial coding
included anywhere from 36 to 93 codes per transcription. The lower numbers typically attributed to technical difficulties in the recorded product. An example of initial coding is included below:

Table 3.5  Example of Initial Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Quote</th>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam, line 25</td>
<td>“But I’m living in &lt;state&gt; right now and I’m taking online classes because going to an actual classroom just wasn’t feasible for me and my wife at this time.”</td>
<td>out-of-state resident, wasn’t feasible, married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca, line 60</td>
<td>“I have enjoyed her very much. I have emailed her a lot. I remember in that class, we had a lot of different like social media or whatever, but yes. I think a lot of that was because she was so amazing in her emails. She was on top of it all the time. I had a connection with her through just that.”</td>
<td>instructor interaction, email, diversity of assignments, positive experience, email response time, student-teacher bond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, line 57</td>
<td>“I don’t know, I guess just doing the work and just communicating with your teachers and other students in the class as well. So, when a teacher (inaudible) at lot of discussion boards, that opens up a lot of communication between other classmates and the instructor. It does help you be a little bit more engaged in your online course.”</td>
<td>indecisive, “doing the work”, communication with teacher and students, participation in discussion boards</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After I completed all interviews and transcribed them accordingly, I then established a list of all open codes and organized them into common categories or reoccurring themes. During the stage of focused coding, I conducted a more selective phase of sorting and combining initial codes into a more concise and simple list to develop the theoretical direction of the study (Charmaz, 2014). The following table shows an example of focused coding:

Table 3.6  Example of Focused Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam, line 25</td>
<td>out-of-state resident, wasn’t feasible, married</td>
<td>Demographics, Challenges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca, line 60</td>
<td>Instructor interaction, email, diversity of assignments, positive experience, email response time, student-teacher bond</td>
<td>Defining Student Engagement, Engaging Activities, Student/Teacher Interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary, line 57</td>
<td>Indecisive, “doing the work”, communication with teacher and students, participation in discussion boards</td>
<td>Defining Student Engagement, Completing Assignments, Student/Teacher Interaction, Engaging Activities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Once I completed focused coding, I advanced to a third phase of coding referred to as theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) explained theoretical sampling as a process to further categorize focused codes to determine if a relation exists between all codes. This final process assisted in developing a new theory as it related to my research of student engagement in online coursework.

Table 3.7 Example of Theoretical Sampling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Initial Codes</th>
<th>Focused Codes</th>
<th>Theoretical Sampling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adam</td>
<td>out-of-state resident, wasn’t feasible, married</td>
<td>Demographics, Challenges</td>
<td>Perception of Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Instructor interaction, email, diversity of assignments, positive experience, email response time, student-teacher bond</td>
<td>Defining Student Engagement, Engaging Activities, Student/Teacher Interaction</td>
<td>Feeling of Engagement, Process of Engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Indecisive, “doing the work”, communication with teacher and students, participation in discussion boards</td>
<td>Defining Student Engagement, Completing Assignments, Student/Teacher Interaction, Engaging Activities</td>
<td>Perception of Engagement, Feeling of Engagement, Process of Engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Ethical Considerations**

Before conducting interviews and obtaining data, I submitted an application to the University’s Institutional Review Board to confirm that minimal risks were assumed of participants. In addition, I ensured that all participants received adequate information regarding the study by having read and agreed to the informed consent form. Participants were also asked to verbally consent to participation in the study before the interview was conducted. This consent was also included on video recording as well. I stored recorded interviews on my personal laptop that is protected by a user password. To protect the privacy of participants, access to the recordings, completed transcriptions, and memos was limited to my viewing only. I deleted audio files and transcriptions upon completion of the dissertation study. Furthermore, I changed
names of all participants, as well as the academic college and institution, to ensure confidentiality.

**Triangulation**

To gain a comprehensive understanding of student engagement in this particular course, I used the data provided from student participants, online instructors, and the course syllabus. Although the study was originally intended to only include distance learners pursuing online degree programs, an error in the recruitment process resulted in additional benefit of including a small number of traditional campus students in the qualitative study. Triangulation of these sources allowed me to better relate to student responses of the interview protocol. While the majority of data were gained directly from the twenty 20 interviews, the explanations shared by the online instructions and the details included in the course syllabus allowed me to fill in many gaps without have to ask additional questions of the participants. This benefit allowed me to devote more time and attention to the specific concepts that were shared by the student participants.

**Quality Assurance**

Grounded theory provided the opportunity for researchers to conduct a study that is grounded in data and not restricted by specific theories or pre-conceived assumptions or theories. This type of study contributed to the trustworthiness of my research. By conducting a qualitative study with the use of video-recorded interviews, I was able to gain a personal understanding of how many online students define engagement. Grounded theory allowed me to focus on specific words and stories to develop a more accurate representation of multiple perspectives. By involving students across several majors within one academic college, I was able to conduct a more in-depth review as it considered the perceptions of all those involved while still sharing
specific confinement of participants. Furthermore, as recommended by Glesne (2011), participants were given the opportunity to review their transcriptions to ensure that I recorded their responses appropriated. Due to my experiences within online education, I knew that I must be aware of my bias and opinions as it related to the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These experiences allowed me to relate to student stories and ask for clarification or further descriptions when needed.

**Positionality Statement**

I have been involved in online learning, both as an educator and as a graduate student. As a graduate student, I have taken several online classes and personally experienced the benefits and challenges of completing online coursework. I appreciated the flexibility that online learning provides but I also related to the frustration in dealing with technology and feeling disconnected from classmates and faculty.

In addition, I have had the opportunity to research this topic in two previous case study projects. The first case study served as a pilot study to this dissertation research. For the initial pilot study, I interviewed 20 students previously enrolled in compass-style course required by one academic department at a large public institution. In this case, students were majoring in the same online degree program. This population of students ultimately defined student engagement in online classes as the ability to communicate with instructors and peers within an online environment. In the second case study, I was given the opportunity to conduct research with a faculty member who sought to determine whether traditional classroom students found benefit in a newly modified flipped classroom model. The faculty member posted lectures, assignments, and discussions threads in learning modules made available to students through the University’s learning management system. To gain students perceptions of engagement using this new flipped
classroom model, we interviewed willing participants using a focus group model. In defining student engagement in general, participants used terms such as “being involved,” “having discussions,” and “being attentive.” Students involved in that study did perceive the online component to be engaging due to participation in discussion threads. My experiences in these two different research projects allowed me to better prepare for this dissertation research effort. It also gave me beneficial insights that prompted me to develop an interview protocol that was more appropriate for this specific population and purpose of the study. Because I had previous experiences in interviewing participants and discussing aspects of engagement, I felt more comfortable and confident in conducting the interview for this study.

As an educator, I have over 10 years of experience in teaching. Over the course of time, I have taught both in a traditional campus classroom and in a virtual online classroom. As an instructor, I understand the time and effort that it takes to personally engage students. Within an online environment, I have experienced and understand the additional time and effort that is needed to relate to and engage online learners. Finally, as a professional, I have many years of experience in advising online students and hearing their challenges associated with learning in an online environment. It has become a personal goal of mine to become more knowledgeable and understanding of this unique population. This specific study not only serves my personal aspirations, it also benefits the college directly. Enrollments in their online degree programs have grown significantly over the past several years, and they seek to enhance the quality of their degree programs to better serve this growing population.

Summary of Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I shared the methodology and research design for dissertation research. I conducted a grounded theory case study to explore student perceptions of engagement within a
single online course at a large public university. I explained the use of semi-structured interviews to collect data and then analyze data by several phases of initial, focused, and theoretical coding. My efforts intended to provide a quality study that maintained trustworthiness and ethical considerations to make a helpful contribution to the field of higher education and online learning.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from this qualitative study used to define engagement in an online learning environment. I conducted a total of 20 video-recorded interviews between October 23, 2017 and December 4, 2017. In addition to completing semi-structured interviews, each of the three online instructors responded, by email, to five brief questions regarding their perception of engagement in an online learning environment. The course syllabus, which was identical for each course, was also reviewed and analyzed for proper reference and understanding of each participant’s responses.

An analysis of this grounded theory study, which involved initial, focused and theoretical coding, revealed several specific concepts in the pursuit of defining student engagement in online learning. In this chapter, I provide a more in-depth understanding of each participant’s perception and definition of engagement. The following themes are discussed: defining student engagement, perceptions of engaging activities, motivators of engagement, and challenges of engaging online. Each section introduces several sub-themes presented through data analysis.

The Participants

Fifteen participants were distance learners pursuing online degrees, whereas, five students were traditional campus students who chose to take this course in an online format. The interview protocol focused on each participant’s perception of student engagement in his or her online coursework. To begin the interview, they were asked to define engagement in online
learning and then explain whether they felt engaged in GES 300. The following table summarizes the 20 student definitions of engagement.

Table 4.1  Engagement as defined by Student Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student</th>
<th>MA/DL</th>
<th>Definition of Engagement</th>
<th>Engaged in GES 300</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Adam    | DL    | “engaging with peers”  
“mostly just doing your work”                                                             | Yes               |
| Allie   | DL    | “getting readings and assignments done”  
“focus on the class … absorb the information”                                               | Yes               |
| Ashley  | DL    | “talking to other students and teacher”  
“Professor has a lecture and stuff”                                                           | Yes               |
| Carol   | DL    | “contact w/ other students”  
“how involved I am with projects or responsibilities … involved”  
“how many times I log in …. and post on discussion boards”                                 | No                |
| Cassie  | DL    | “active and intentional listening”  
“participating when we have discussion”  
“actively being involved… enjoy the activities”                                              | Yes               |
| Grace   | DL    | “reach out to people”  
“distance assignments”  
“gotten feedback”                                                                             | Yes               |
| Jake    | DL    | “collaborative effort between professor, student, and classmates to understand the set curriculum” | Yes               |
| Jay     | MA    | “based upon my personality”  
“just taking in what I've learned, understanding it and then putting into practice”         | No                |
| Karen   | DL    | “conversation in the classroom”  
“doing the discussion threads”                                                                      | Unsure            |
| Kelly   | DL    | “engaging with one another”  
“communicating back and forth”                                                                     | No                |
| Kristy  | MA    | “comment on discussion posts”  
“teacher has an ability <to communicate>”                                                   | Yes               |
| Lacey   | DL    | “actually think… I can relate”  
“I feel like I'm the teacher”                                                                      | Yes               |
| Leslie  | MA    | “staying involved”  
“all attention is being put into assignment”  
“work is interesting”                                                                       | Yes               |
| Mary    | DL    | “doing the work … communicating w/ teachers and other students”  
“discussion boards…opens up a lot of communication”                                             | Yes               |
| Nicole  | MA    | “paying attention to what you are doing … learning the material”  
“discussion posts are engaging”                                                              | No                |
| Patrick | DL    | “participating in discussions… completing assignments on time”  
“reviewing material… watch videos”                                                            | Yes               |
| Rebecca | DL    | “discussions… and video lectures”  
“it’s individualized”                                                                         | Yes               |
| Sally   | MA    | “time spent on coursework”                                                                   | No                |
| Samantha| DL    | “it isn't synonymous engagement… but lectures… lots of discussions… communicating”        | Yes               |
| Tracy   | DL    | “diversity of activities … how much I have to do”  
“ability to engage w/ professor”                                                              | Yes               |
In addition to student participants, each of the three adjunct instructors of GES 300 were approached and asked to participate in a video-recorded interview. Due to personal obligations and professional restrictions, each instructor declined; however, all agreed to respond to an email that included five brief questions to gain their perception of engagement in an online classroom. Instructors were asked to share their definition of engagement in an online course. Their abbreviated response is listed in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>Definition of Engagement</th>
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<td>Roberts</td>
<td>“students interact with each other sharing ideas and thoughts”</td>
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<td>“getting questions and feedback from students via course email and comments in grade center”</td>
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<td>“engagement occurs when the student knows you are there”</td>
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<td>Smith</td>
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<td>“coursework where all are involved”</td>
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<td>“students can provide their own feedback to the discussion, assignments”</td>
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<td>Williams</td>
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<td>“interaction with instructor”</td>
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<td>“more than just email”</td>
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<td>“tools within course that increase activity, communication and collaboration”</td>
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**Defining Student Engagement**

Participants were asked very early in the interview to share their definition of engagement in an online course. Over half of the participants hesitated to provide a definition and each waited seconds while pondering a response. Even when verbalizing their definition, participants used words like “ummm,” “I guess,” and “I don’t know.” Cassie, an online student pursuing a degree that will lead to a second career, acknowledged, “I know it can be defined in so many ways,” which is apparent in the analysis. These 20 students shared definitions of engagement that involved four main themes: doing the coursework, conversation in the classroom, communication with the instructor, and individualized engagement.
Engagement is “doing the coursework”

Adam, a distance learner, defined engagement as “mainly just doing the coursework.” In fact, a majority of participants agreed as over half of them referenced the completion of coursework, including readings and assignments, when defining student engagement. In GES 300, students are required to complete 10 modules that include weekly readings and assignments. Allie, a distance learner who juggles full-time employment along with a full-time course load, defined engagement as a process that includes

… prioritizing your classes into your routine and getting your readings done, getting your assignments done ahead of the due date and actually taking or setting apart actual time to do your studies and work on whatever classwork you have to do and just really take time to focus on the class and setting apart a time in the day to really absorb the information and not just get finished as quickly as you can.

Six others referenced the investment of time and effort when sharing their definition of engagement. Carol, an older adult online student, and Sally, a traditional student who occasionally completes online classwork, both said that they are less engaged in this specific online course because they were able to finish assignments quickly and complete the course ahead of schedule. GES 300 allows students to work ahead in the course, as long as requirements are submitted by previously set deadlines. Generally speaking, this is not uncommon in online courses. Adam said that he is less engaged in online classes than he would be in a traditional classroom because he doesn’t have to engage “on a regular basis, because it’s only that one assignment every week or every other week.” Nicole, a campus student who enjoys taking online courses, elaborated on the reference of just doing your work by stating, “I would say engagement is not just doing the assignments, it's not just doing them and forgetting about them.” Jay, a campus student who prefers taking online classes, supported this concept by explaining that
engagement involves, “just taking in what I’ve learned, understanding it and then putting it into practice.” One of the online instructors agreed saying,

Some students are engaged because they realize the modules in this course can help them in their search for a job in their field. I also think certain modules resonate with students because they have ‘ah-ha’ moments – I didn’t know I needed that on a resume, I’m missing some important items on my LinkedIn profile, etc.

In summary, many participants recognize that engagement involves time and effort for completing course assignments and related activities. For several students, they considered the knowledge learned from course content to be the greatest representation of their engagement in the course. Among the five students who only defined engagement as coursework completed, three of the five were actually traditional campus students. Only two of the online learners limited their definition to include only attention towards coursework. The majority of participants who included completion of coursework in their definition also recognized the fact that other aspects are involved in their definition, such as communication with classmates and instructors. Jake, a distance learner who has completed online courses at several institutions, perceives engagement as “a collaborative effort between the professor and myself and my fellow classmates and the class and the whole profession to achieve a goal and understand the set curriculum that is laid out.”

**Engagement is “conversation in the classroom”**

When defining engagement, over half of the participants referenced the importance of interacting with peers. In addition, each of the three online instructors included “student to student interaction” in their definitions. Overwhelmingly, participants referenced the use of discussion boards to create a “conversation in the classroom” with other students in an online environment. This course requires participation in five separate discussion threads. Students are asked to introduce themselves at the beginning of the semester and then make four additional
posts related to four learning modules. The discussion threads required students to make one original post and then reply to at least two classmates’ posts by a specific deadline. In their discussions, students are asked to “build upon these posts by providing additional details, statistics, ideas, personal perspectives, or links to interesting, relevant material and then conclude with a question or new idea to further stimulate the discussion.”

In her definition of engagement, one student rationalized:

I feel like that’s a lot with doing the discussion boards even though I detest discussion boards I know their purpose is to provide that cohesion you would get in classrooms, because in the classroom you have to do it [inaudible] conversation. So discussion boards do a great job in doing that. It allows you to talk to your classmates, listen to their like perspectives and views and have a type of conversation in the classroom. (Karen, online military student)

Many participants went on to say how much they enjoyed hearing others’ thoughts, opinions, and different perspectives on various topics. Cassie stated that the communication through discussion board, keeps you “engaged and connected” in coursework so that you don’t feel alone in an online classroom. Samantha, an online student who also works full-time, included that she enjoys the discussions because “it doesn’t talk about the material in the book but more talk on some of what’s going on in real life.” Karen added that if students “keep going on a discussion board, it’s great to have a conversation with someone—a long conversation about anything.” “Being able to see everyone else’s opinions kind of opens you up to everything else that’s going on in the course … instead of seeing just your own views,” explained Sally, a traditional campus student. Although Sally didn’t include interaction with peers when defining engagement, she did include that she considered “collaboration with other people in the class” to be among the most engaging activities in an online course. Others said that these conversations through discussion boards motivate them to put more effort in their responses after seeing what others submit.
Grace, a stay-at-home mom who is completing her degree online, shared that she engages with other students in several ways outside of discussion boards. She uses a Facebook group, Group Me phone app, and email set up in each of her courses to communicate with fellow students. She has used these additional tools to discuss study ideas, get feedback on assignments, and ask questions about challenging assignments. Online students, Carol and Karen, also mentioned use of the Facebook page to talk to people in their classes outside of the actual online classroom. Karen declared, “It makes a huge difference in having not only the [class] discussions, but outside the classroom makes those people seem like a real person rather than just behind a computer.” Carol included that while interacting with other students doesn’t affect her ability to engage, her motivation to engage is increased by using tools such as Facebook because she receives feedback from past and current students in a quicker manner than in the actual classroom.

As a whole, data revealed approximately the same number of participants that stated coursework was important also felt that communication with peers should be included when defining engagement. Two students felt that “conversation in the classroom” and “engaging with one other” were the only ways to define student engagement. Participants’ responses indicate that interaction with peers may serve various purposes in an online classroom. While some students consider it “fun” to get to know other students enrolled in their class, many find value in learning new perspectives and a higher level of critical thinking. In addition, exactly half of all participants included the importance of both coursework and communication when defining engagement. These findings indicate that involvement with content along with communication with peers can develop a collaborative effort to achieve engagement.
Engagement is “communicating with instructor”

Although only seven participants included instructor communication when defining engagement, every participant in the study included the importance of feedback from the instructor when discussing other activities that create a sense of engagement. Each of the online instructors included some aspect of student/instructor interaction in their definition of engagement. Instructor Roberts revealed:

I also believe engagement occurs when the student knows you are there. I always answer emails within 24 hours or less. I make sure I grade papers and assignments before the next assignment is due – they then know where they stand and what you expect. Again, this shows you are there with them every step of the way.

Tracy, who has taken online courses at both a community college and this university, defined engagement as “my ability to engage with my professors, and their response time, and how I feel that they are interested in my education.” Three other students defined engagement as more of a collaborative effort between an instructor and classmates within an online environment. Several students indicated that interaction with the instructor could affect their motivation to engage in online coursework. Leslie, a traditional campus student, indicated that her level of engagement is often determined by the level of effort put forth by the instructor. She explained:

I feel like if an instructor doesn’t want to interact or engage in the course then I will not really want to do as well in the course; just because I feel like they are not putting in the effort so I wouldn’t want to put in as much effort just because I feel like they are not teaching to the best of their ability. Granted, it is an online course, but still little things they can do can really help the students.

Tracy, a middle-aged online student, shared a similar opinion stating that she is less interested if she perceives the instructor to be less interested in the success of her students. She elaborated:

I feel like if they care, then there’s a reason that I should care. They are the expert. They know that it’s important and they want to make sure that you understand how important it is. That’s why they respond.
Mary, an online student parent who juggles full-time employment, agreed and provided an example of helpful interaction by the instructor. She said:

I guess it’s good if that instructor is giving weekly updates, kind of checking in with us and just updating us all on what’s going on. It makes it a lot easier just because thinking that the instructor cares about what you’re learning instead of them just giving you assignments and due dates in the beginning of the course and then just letting you go.

Carol, an older online student, stated that an instructor’s willingness to interact also affects how she responds or approaches instructor feedback. She provided two different experiences that included an instructor who encouraged interactions versus a different instructor who was briefer in communication. She explained that she felt more comfortable when the instructor encouraged her to contact her with questions or concerns. In regards to the “professor that was really aloof sounding in her emails and so,” it would make her “hesitate to respond or ask a question.”

The majority of students included in this study referenced the importance of instructor availability through email. Each of the online instructors recognized the expectation of timely email responses as well. Two students considered themselves engaged in GES 300 based upon the fact that they were able to email their instructor multiple times throughout the course. When asked if interaction with the instructor helped her become more engaged in a class, Rebecca replied with the following statement:

Yes! Absolutely! Yes. Absolutely. It makes all the difference in the world. Like I was talking about with the GES class, on my very first assignment, I could not come up with ... something about where I see myself in 10 years with my education… So I emailed her and she emailed me back and explained something about being a lifelong learner …

She said, ‘Education is not just a degree.’ That has stuck with me the whole semester and it just made me look at things in a different… and I even emailed her afterward and said, thank you. Because it truly made something shift in my mindset and I realized how close-minded I had been on what was really needed. It’s not just in a classroom, it’s not just to obtain a degree. Her one comment on one assignment did that. The feedback- I treasure it. I really do. Good or bad. It challenges you to - for me, that is just as important as knowing how to be a good public speaker. That is just very important... alongside the academics.
Students also felt that online instructors should be more prompt at responding to emails because they cannot communicate in person. Sally, who is completing classes off-campus for just one semester, agreed, “It’s definitely important that they are on top of their emails…because otherwise you would just feel like you are lost and there’s nobody to reach out to.” When discussing communication through email, students shared similar perspectives of reasonable response time for email replies. Five students agreed that instructors should reply to emails from students within 24 hours.

In addition to communication through email, a large number of students sensed engagement through instructor feedback on assignments and assessments. Leslie, a traditional campus student, said that feedback is important to her because it helps to ensure that she is “on the right track and…learning the information that [she] [is] supposed to learn.” Nine students indicated that feedback was encouraging and appreciated because it helped them improve their coursework. Analysis of this theme indicated that communication with the instructor is important to online learners.

Engagement is “individualized”

Fifteen of the 20 participants recognized engagement as an individual effort by qualifying their definition as somewhat of a personal encounter. Jay said, “Engagement for me would be…” Other students, like Ashley and Lacey, shared “I feel like…” Tracy described the term as “my ability to engage…” To better understand the individual aspect of these references, I further organized these references into themes of personal disposition, level of challenge, interest, and attention.

Disposition. Several students embraced the perception that engagement is also related to individual aspects of the student. Rebecca, a mother of 5, shared, “I don’t know if I always feel
engagement in online courses.” She further elaborated that engagement is “individualized” and students ultimately decide how engaged they want to be in class. Instructor Williams, the online instructor with the most years of experience in teaching online, observed this to be true in her experience. “Some students want more, some seem to want less or no communication with other students,” declared Instructor Williams. Lacey, who also pursues her degree online, related to this concept as she replied, “I’d rather not have interaction at all.” Jay, although a campus student, shared Lacey’s opinion and contributed it to the fact that interactions with students are not helpful to him due to his “introverted personality.” Also, Cassie included that online learning “just works better for my personality or just my way of studying…just more compatible.” Others mentioned that online learning is more engaging to them because it allows them to use their preferred learning styles. For example, Patrick is a traditional-aged student who decided to pursue other opportunities back home and finish his degree online because he felt that he was more engaged in online classes than he was as a campus student. He clarified,

It’s easier to obtain information in online setting and there are far less distractions than you would say in a traditional setting. Not that the traditional setting is bad, I prefer online classes. I tend to excel compare to the classroom setting.

Level of challenge and effort. When asked why he was less engaged in GBA 300 in comparison to other online courses, Jay explained that the difficulty of a course has an effect on how engaged he must be in a specific course. As a full-time campus student who works part-time, Jay acknowledged that he already had the knowledge of the resources offered in GES 300. He offered, “So I’m just as engaged but I guess it doesn’t take as much, as much effort because of already learned material.” Sally, also a traditional student, suggested that the amount of work required is related to the engagement:

I definitely think it has something to do with the content of the course… like compared to this class, GES 300 to CA 200. In CA 200, there was a ton more reading so I naturally
had to be more engaged and participate more, like daily, because I had to keep up with the reading…You had to keep up with the readings for several weeks and then do assignments. So it wasn’t like I could just do it one day and get it done. So I definitely think that the course material affects like how much I have to spend on the course. I think that differs in online courses.

Nicole, who chose online courses due to scheduling conflicts, referenced the amount of effort that she puts into online classes stating, “I will say that I put more effort into my campus classes than I put into my online courses because my campus classes typically apply directly to my major requirements.

**Interest.** Cassie, who has completed both traditional campus classes for her first degree and online courses for her second degree, included that engagement involves being “interested in listening” and “enjoying the activities that are being made.” Leslie agreed and she said that engagement includes “staying involved and making sure that the work is interesting.” Carol and Nicole, mentioned that they felt more engaged in courses that were specifically related to their major than in more general classes like GES 300. Carol, an older adult who is motivated by helping family, elaborated, “Obviously because I’m very interested in that. I would- the lectures were much more interesting, the readings were more interesting. So, yes, I did engage in those courses more actively rather than passively.” Tracy related, “I feel more engaged. Maybe I cared less in previous classes because I had to take them even though I didn’t really want to take them.”

**Attention and Time Spent.** In her definition of engagement, Nicole stated, “engagement is not just doing the assignments, it’s not just doing them and forgetting about them. It’s actually paying attention to what you are doing…” Other students also referenced the need for attention in coursework to define engagement. Allie mentioned the importance of taking “time to focus on the class” while Cassie described attention as “actively and intently listening to what’s going on
in the classroom.” Leslie said that engagement occurs when “all your attention is being put into
the assignment or activity or task you are working on.” Carol included that engagement “could
involve how many times I log in to [classes] to view content or post on discussion boards.”
Several participants brought up the fact that assignments in GES 300 were set up on a weekly
schedule. Adam suggested that weekly attempts might not be sufficient to properly engage in
courses. He reported, “I’m not engaging with like open discussion on a regular basis or with
peers on a regular basis, because it is only that one assignment every week or every other week
with the peers.”

Perceptions of Engaging Activities

In order to relate their definition of engagement to more practical application, students
were asked to describe activities that they felt were more engaging in an online environment.
Their responses easily fit into five main categories and were addressed in the following order of
popularity: discussions with students, written assignments, individual projects, listening to
lectures, and group activities.

“Discussions with other students”

By far, the largest number of students referred to discussion boards as being among the
most engaging activities in online courses. In fact, many students even included “participating in
discussion boards” when stating their definition of engagement. Both campus and online
students, reference discussion boards as a way to “make them” have discussions with other
students. Karen included:

So I feel like that’s a lot with doing the discussion boards even though I detest discussion
boards. I know their purpose is to provide that cohesion that you would get at classrooms,
because in the classroom you have to do it through conversation. So discussion boards do
a great job in doing that. It allows you to come talk to the classmates, listen to their like
perspectives and views and have a type of conversation in the classroom” (Karen, online
student).
Instructor Smith also considered discussion boards to be engaging in her course. In response to activities she felt was more engaging, she stated:

Discussion activities where the other students respond and add to the discussion and assignments where the students submit work and other students provide peer review of the submission. They also may discuss this back and forth as well. Both of these are the most engaging activities in our course.

Allie explained that discussion boards promote engagement in the classroom. She explained:

I definitely feel like that promotes engagement because I might be reading the exact same thing that everyone else in the class read. And then I can give my interpretation and my thoughts on it but then I can also see what other people say. It gives you different views and it gives you different feedback on similar subjects. Sometimes, we are asked to find articles ourselves and then we bring that back to the table. In that case, you end up with lots of different articles on the same subject, some pro for the subject and some against it. We then have the ability to reply and kind of put our two cents in on whatever else was said. So yeah, I definitely think it promotes engagement more so than a quiz or a personal writing assignment.

Nicole agreed as she recalled the benefit of conversations through discussion boards by saying:

…when you respond to others ideas and use your own, you are kind of using both ideas and combining them and coming up with a new really great idea. I think that is really important, and good part about online courses.

Kelly likes discussion boards as well because she enjoys the diversity of viewpoints offered by discussion boards. She affirmed,

It’s interesting to see people’s viewpoints. So it’s kind of fun… and personally, you know, they are helpful… It is different that we have everybody—with the questions that they might answer—it makes you think about things differently from them.

Students, like Patrick, have similar thoughts and uses discussion boards to measure his progress in a course. He said, “I like to see where I stand along with my classmates on the topic through the discussion. I like to see opposing and different viewpoints.” Patrick, a distance learner, and Leslie a main-campus student mentioned that they excel in an online environment because they
actually interact more with other students than in a face-to-face classroom experience. Leslie reasons:

I feel the discussion questions in certain courses require you to actually think more of the class itself or the information that you are being taught. It also helps you interact with other classmates. Cause in a physical classroom, a lot of people are shy and don’t want to talk as much. Like, I’m shy myself and I don't really want to don’t talk to others in class but I’m more comfortable on discussion boards and I enjoy hearing other people’s point of views and what they have to say about the topic.

Rebecca, who hasn’t always felt engagement in online courses, shared, “the only thing that we did that involved other students was the discussion board.” Tracy shared the same experience in her online classes. Regardless, Cassie included that discussion boards are helpful in an online classroom because the interaction with classmates keeps you “engaged and connected. Otherwise, you would just be all alone.”

Online instructors considered conversations among the students to be engaging as well. Without being prompted, they each made comments regarding the interaction among students. Instructor Smith specifically included:

I am very happy with the depth at which most students provide feedback. This is evidence that they have read the other student submissions and formalized a knowledgeable response with suggestions for improvement. In addition, we have several discussion assignments where the students will submit their work and respond to other students engaging in the discussion of the topic. From what I have seen, I do believe the students like to see what their classmates are posting and discussing on the topic. Many of the students within the same field of study find something interesting or new that they were not aware of and respond. I like to see this type of discussion because it opens their eyes to new ideas and thoughts going forward.

“Writing about topics”

Kristy prefers “writing about topics that the teachers gives us” instead of posting her comments on discussion threads. As a traditional campus student, she attributed that to the fact that she feels that she has to research topics more before she can respond to comments on a discussion thread. Lacey and Patrick, both online students, mentioned their fondness of writing
assignments that allowed them to create a journal or reflect upon politics or current events. Allie agreed by sharing, “I like to reflect and give my feedback after my interpretation of whatever it was you were assigned to read.” Both Kelly and Sally said that they also preferred written assignments in online classes, such as writing a paper or research report, because instructors are more likely to provide “clear instructions about what things they are looking for” (Kelly). As a matter of fact, the majority of participants declared that they preferred any type of assignment that provided clear and structured guidelines. Sally enjoys completing her online assignments in one day over the weekend and mentioned the importance of work that she “can solely do and submit it online.”

“Step-out-of-class” Projects

When asked what types of assignments are most engaging, Tracy, an online student who appreciates “diversity in assignments,” replied, “I like the ones that kind of make me step out of the class.” She elaborated to say that she enjoys assignments that make her research information, outside of regular quizzes and discussion threads. Samantha had the same preference as she referenced an assignment in which she had to research local establishments and complete case study projects. Carol included, “I personally like case studies because it helps me take what I've learned and actually apply it.” Other online students shared similar thoughts but through assignments that can be used in real-life situations. Grace proclaimed:

The ones that require, um, they are just multi-faceted like we had the LinkedIn profile, the assignment for GES 300 and then another 200 class...I’ve enjoyed the activities or assignments that have transferred into the real life—like for jobs that I can use in the future. I recently completed my resume and a LinkedIn profile and those are things that will go with me until... and I'll continue to make adjustments too. So that—if I was to translate into the real world currently are the ones I am enjoying the most.

Instructor Roberts recalled other circumstances that related to Grace’s approval of transferrable content.
I think some students are engaged because they realize the modules in this course can help them in their search for a job in their field. I also think certain modules resonate with students because they have “ah-ha” moments – I didn’t know I needed that on a resume, I’m missing some important items on my LinkedIn profile, etc.

“Listening to lectures”

Several students also mentioned that engagement included “listening to lectures.” Both Jay and Rebecca, representing both campus and online learners, said that they prefer lectures that are actually video recorded. Jay proclaimed, “hearing it and then reading it - it’s better than just reading it, and everybody knows that.” Rebecca agreed:

There’s something about a sitting in or watching a lecture... you are seeing them and hearing them talk and being able to take notes in the lecture. It really helps me too, because what they talk about is what they really find the most important. So, I think having a videoed lecture that we could access numerous times would help with engagement.

Cassie enjoyed lectures that were recorded while the teacher was lecturing in a face-to-face classroom. She shared:

So…what I found interesting is that I got to hear what the other students were saying – like I was almost in the classroom and I could hear what these students were asking and I could hear what the instructor was giving back to this student. So, that was kind of neat because I actually felt like I was sitting in the classroom. It might not be possible to do in all classes, and it might not work for all classes but it was something that I thought changed the experience a little. Although I’m not there, I feel like I’m there listening to other students ask questions and all that kind of stuff.

Tracy recalled that she remembered a class in which the professor offered reviews for tests by providing video recordings through programs like Collaborate or Wiki. For students that couldn’t participate in the live recording, the instructor would post it within a course page so that others could watch it later and review the feedback. Allie said that she also appreciates when faculty record their lectures because “it’s a lot different to have someone talk about something than to read it yourself.”
**Group Activities**

Kelly said she experienced engagement with other students through group projects that allowed students to work together through video chat or other synchronous programs. Several other true online learners agreed that group projects were engaging. Karen elaborated by saying,

I actually like group activities where you take this whatever project. You have 5 people and you work with them because it makes it more like a classroom. Because you have to communicate with them outside the classroom, it can be stressful but it’s very helpful.

Mary said that she enjoyed group projects although it is somewhat “difficult to navigate… trying to do work without actually seeing each other and seeing what we’re talking about.” Cassie added:

…it can be a little stressful, depending on who is in your group. I’ve had some courses where everyone participated and it really worked well. And then I’ve other courses, where it might have just been one or two of us that really carried the weight as far as the assignment goes (chuckles). So it’s really just hit or miss. The ones that don’t care—I mean, I think it works but it just depends on the group.

Carol said that she has participated in several group projects throughout enrollment in her major program classes. She agreed with Cassie’s comment and mentioned that some group experiences were more successful than others. In concluding her thoughts, she said, “I think for the limited time, to some extent, it encouraged or increased the amount or the type of engagement to that particular online class.”

**Motivators of Engagement**

Since motivation has often been associated with engagement, I felt that it was important to ask the participants how they were motivated to engage in their online coursework. Interestingly, students appeared to be least challenged by responding to this question. Analysis uncovered the following aspects to be motivators of engagement for this specific population: achievement, individual interest, and personal gratification.
Achievement

Overwhelmingly, students said they were motivated to complete assignments throughout each course by simply earning a good grade. Adam said, “I’m very focused on getting the best grade possible. So, if I have an assignment due, you know, I’m going to make sure I’m going to complete it so I can get those points.” Sally agreed, “If I’m going to get a grade on it, then I’m going to do it and I’m going to submit it.” Nicole, a traditional campus student, confessed, “mostly for me, it’s just the grade really. I don’t really get invested in the information in online classes.” Others, like Carol, Cassie and Karen, explained that a higher GPA was a firm requirement to be successful in their program. In her major, Karen is required to have a B average or higher in every course to progress in her major and ultimately earn an internship that is required for graduation.

Although grades motivate students within each course, participants also included that the goal of earning a degree in general was a huge motivating factor. Rebecca, who was finishing the last semester of her degree requirements, said that she maintained motivation this past year by just keeping her graduation date in mind. In Rebecca’s case, like many other adult online students, finishing this degree was a journey that she began many years ago as a traditional college student. Other participants claimed that getting a degree motivated them by increasing future opportunities with their respective field. Jake’s company is providing financial support to allow him to finish his college degree. He is using what he learns in his online courses to apply directly to his current position and hopefully advance into higher roles in the future. Many other students are pursuing specific degree programs because they have a personal desire to make a career change or work in a specific field. Tracy is motivated by “just the thought of getting my
degree and actually being able to work in the field that I’m really interested in and being able to help people.”

**Individual interest**

While graduation serving as an entryway into a career is motivating, several students described their learning experience to be just as motivating. Ashley offered, “My major is something I’m actually interested in, so it’s not a pain to complete assignments because I’m interested in the subject.” Tracy revealed that she even chose her major because she was specifically interested in the topic “because it affects everybody.” She included:

> I definitely think that when I can share it with my family and my peers, it makes it more fun for me. I have the interaction as a student and getting feedback and sharing my knowledge… it’s just with other people and not just students.

Jay related on a more personal level by sharing, if the course content “intrigues me, then I learn it more quickly because I like what I’m learning.” Allie agreed, “I feel like because I’m interested, I’m more engaged. I like the classes so I’m more likely to complete the coursework and get more out of it.”

**Personal Gratification**

For the adult online students, many of them mentioned that they were motivated by very personal reasons. Some, like Carol and Grace, pursued their specific major to gain the opportunity to help family deal with troubling health issues. They both developed a passion for learning more about specific diseases that their family battled and now strive to help them overcome the challenges of a lifestyle dictated by their health concerns. Karen, an active member of the military, wants to finish her degree quickly because she “wants to impact the military community” by serving in a role that is currently lacking qualified personnel.
Furthermore, from the distance learners, I heard a common theme throughout the course of interviews: finish what you started. The majority of distance students, if not all of them, had experiences as traditional college students, but were unable to complete their degree as planned. Today, extrinsic goals of earning a college degree are fueled by intrinsic motivation to finish. Although Cassie remains motivated by her future career, she shares the personal reward that comes from her dedication to this academic goal:

Oh wow! Well, this has been a ten-year journey. I’ve been at this for 10 years. So when I decided to um, to cut back, and go to school full time, for me, I’ve just been at this for so long. So I debated on this for so long. I debated on whether I should take the money and it came to a point where I had to make a decision. And I made the decision that I wanted to stay committed to this. Whenever I would get to that point and say, oh my gosh, why did I do this, I would just start to think about how long I’ve been at this. I’ve been trying to get to this point for 10 years. So, um, that’s the motivation... how long I’ve been trying to get to this point. You know, sacrifices made at this point, you have to make it happen.

Adam describes regret from not finishing with his college friends and explains why he is motivated by his personal accomplishment:

I just want my college degree. I went to college right after high school, and I messed around more than I should have and ended up having to stop going; failing out, basically, after about two years. So, that was in 2010 – or 2011 was my last year of going to college. And, then, two years after that I started seeing all of my friends get their degrees. And, then, you know, the people who took five years, they got their degrees the year after that. And I was just watching them all get their degrees and start their careers, and I felt left behind. And so, it kind of motivated me to go get my degree. And so, I just had to wait till the right moment, the right opportunity to go back.

Rebecca says that her desire to share a lesson with her children has motivated her to finish her degree.

But my driving force is that we always finish what we started. We are not ... I always tell my kids, you gotta be strong and you gotta finish, you don’t quit. When I left so many years ago, I always said that I would finish. And like I said, with him serving in active duty and things happening along the way, it derailed us and we didn’t expect it to be this long. (Laughter) But I think that’s what makes this that much more special. We are not finishing, but we are finishing under some pretty challenging circumstances. So, if we can do this, there’s not a whole lot that’s gonna get in a way that we can’t figure out how
to make it work. So, the driving forces are the finish what we started and then I really want my kids to see that we finish what we started.

**Challenges of Online Engagement**

Although the interview protocol did not include a specific question asking students to share their challenges to engagement, their responses clearly implied that online learners are faced with many obstacles throughout their education. This section highlights four main themes associated with the challenges of online engagement. Students shared concerns due to isolation, limited interaction with instructors, technological difficulties, and time management of responsibilities.

**Isolation**

Several participants in the study made comments that suggested a sense of isolation as an online learner. Rebecca shared that distance learners “know they are doing this alone, but yes, engagement is something and I’m not sure I really feel a lot of engagement.” Lacey, an online student who works full time, felt she was engaged in her coursework but she also revealed, “I feel like I’m the teacher.” She disclosed she feels she has to teach herself a lot of the information and therefore engagement has to do with the effort she puts forth into learning the content presented. She also disclosed an encounter that was very frustrating to her as a student because she spent hours trying to contact someone to help solve an important problem. She exclaimed, “Do you know how far it is for me…I was working 90 hours a week and I was like—I don’t have time for this!” Kelly also presented the challenge caused from not being able to actually spend time with an instructor in a face-to-face setting:

…you don’t have the teacher for the day to fill out, like you can’t understand their personality or what their expecting from you. Because there is no, like isn’t any, like one-on-one, you can’t visualize or see how they work, so you just have their name on the screen…
On the other hand, several students suggested that discussion boards keep them from feeling isolated in the online environment. Karen reinforced this practice by declaring, “But the classes that don’t have discussion boards- it really just feels like I’m as sort of one student in a classroom.” Karen also attained benefit in the program’s closed Facebook group because it allows her to connect with students outside her classrooms as well. She explained:

...people around me at work don’t go to a university...I can’t talk to them about assignments, things I’m struggling with, things I can’t understand, but once I make a connection with someone that is different in your group—it’s nice...It makes a huge difference by having not only the blackboard discussions, but outside the classroom makes those people seem like a real person rather than just behind a computer.

Tracy, a true distance learner living in another state, revealed that while she appreciates receiving a lot of emails to inform students about events close to campus, she suggested that the University remember that online learners are typically located miles away. She recommended that the institution research events outside the local area as well. Tracy rationalized:

I know that's a lot to ask but maybe even provide resources so that I could find that information for myself locally. Cause, like, I have no idea how to find conferences and meetings, I would love to be able to do some of that stuff but all they ever talk about is local. And, I don't live here, so, [laughter].

When I asked Tracy if she would like for the institution to record those local events and post as archived videos on the college website, she very excitedly replied, “Yes! I would love that. I would feel like I was a part of those local events!”

“Limited interaction with my Instructors”

Throughout the study, students made passive references to the limited interaction with instructors of online courses. Both online and campus students acknowledged that less interaction occurs in an online classroom in comparison to a traditional face-to-face classroom meeting. Adam, a distance learner, felt that interaction is less needed in an online environments, while Carol expressed her frustration in waiting for responses from her instructor. Kelly also
complained that online students often have to email two or three days ahead of when the assignment is due just because, “It’s just not easy to get in touch with them.” Other students, included below, expressed similar concerns as Carol and Kelly.

In online, it’s hard to get specifics sometimes. I’ve had some trouble with assignments because usually online they will give you a rubric, but it’s not a very detailed rubric. It’s just kind of general. I ended up doing fine but it just kind of...you know, there was not a lot of direction (Nicole).

Most professors teach other classes, but it’s kind of scary when they go, like, you don’t hear any communication for a while and you are like, well, I really don’t even know who to contact (Sally).

While Rebecca appreciated the interaction with her instructors, she also reported:

They were good at [responding to emails], except there was somewhat of a delay in their responses to email. That was challenging because of the time frame. Everything was due, you know, you had like one week to accomplish x, y and z. And you know... as a distance learner, I have more things on me than I ever did when I attended on campus. They want to make sure that we are getting the same material, and even with the delay—it’s a question that I needed. So I would just try to find other means of responding more timely or something.

Although Adam expressed a “limited interaction with instructors,” he did not feel that interaction with instructors affected his ability to engage in online coursework. Karen agreed by saying, “you’re kind of used to the instructor not being that involved on like discussion boards when it’s not that engaging. So, it doesn’t really affect anything. I prefer more engagement, but it doesn’t change the way I learn.”

Instructor Smith can relate to online student’s concerns of reaching their instructors, she offered:

As a previous distant student myself, I do understand the frustration of a student when the instructions are not clear or the instructor is slow to answer questions. Therefore, I make it a point to check my course and emails regularly so that the course or a delayed response is not a reason to add to a students’ frustration.
Karen, an online student enrolled in Instructor Smith’s course section, felt that her instructor helped her engage in the class because of her responses through email. Karen exclaimed, “The professor I have does a really good job of replying back to whatever I write, like some of my resume, she has great recommendations.” Ashley, another student in Instructor Smith’s section, agreed, “Any time I’ve ever had a question it was really easy to reach out to my professor and they were always very quick to reply. So, I would say it was really easy to engage with them online.”

Technology

Technology was frequently mentioned as a challenge met by online students. Over half the participants needed extra guidance in using the tool used to conduct these interviews. Even during interviews, a majority of the encounters had technical difficulties at some point during the session. Rebecca stated early in her interview, “I think that is the most that I’ve learned in this entire year, it’s the technology! [Laughter] I feel like I can do anything now!”

At the end of each interview, I asked students if they had any additional information that they wanted to share regarding their experience as an online learner. Many true online students made recommendations that involved the institution’s use of technology in the online learning experience. Allie reported technical difficulty in her [online] classes due to problems within the learning management system. The issues ultimately affected her ability to process through learning modules and submission of assignments. Lacey recalled a similar problem that involved her computer logging out of timed tests. Kelly mentioned that the university’s website is somewhat overwhelming for online learners and recommended central pages to avoid “roaming all over the website because it’s hard to get to certain places at times.” Several students, both true online learners and traditional campus students, recommended that more instructors utilize video
lectures to provide the opportunity to review lectures as needed when technology or other circumstances prevent them from participating as planned.

**Managing time and responsibilities**

Samantha, a single person who maintains a full-time student load and full-time employment, said that her greatest challenge as a distance learner was “sometimes keeping up with it.” She clarified that she’ll get busy for a few days and forgets to log in every single day to review new posts or other information. Samantha’s instructor, recognizes this as a challenge for other students as well. Instructor Roberts recalled:

> A challenge is some students who take online courses do not realize each course is different and the course requires setting time aside weekly for the online course. In the introduction, I set the expectation for them to look at the course schedule and note due dates. However, usually 10-20% of students on average miss the first assignments because they never looked at the course in Blackboard when the semester started.

Ten out of the 15 online students shared that they maintain family responsibilities in addition to completing coursework. During the interviews, two participants even cared for their small children while responding to questions. Several parents expressed the difficulty of managing their time appropriately. Carol recalled how she would “sit at the table and do school together” with her high school aged son and then also “take care of all the home duties- cooking, cleaning, paying bill, you know, that sort of thing.” Grace explained that she needed to pursue an online program because she had limited options due to her current lifestyle:

> Being able to sit in my car and do homework or study, in between family activities and being able to stay up late and have access to this at all hours of the day- is what works for me right now.

Rebecca, the stay-at-home mother of five young children, described a typical weekday as an online student:

> …the alarm clock goes off at 5 and I wake up and I get everybody ready, and lunches finished. On a good day, I try to do most of that on the night before. Distance learning
has helped me realize that I need to be better organized… So, yes, finish lunches, make breakfast, and get everyone out the door. There’s so many drop off times, we leave our house at 6:15 in the morning and then by the time I finish, I'm home around 9 [a.m.]. And then I try to get all my work done, while my twins are in school. And then I pick everyone up, and then there’s soccer practice and then we get home… Yes, and like I said, during the first semester, there were days that I was up until 2 a.m. just trying to finish.

Many online students, including four within this study, need the flexibility of online courses so that they can work full-time and still take care of their family’s needs. This is Ashley’s first semester taking only online classes. She chose this option because she must work full-time before her first child is born in the next several months. Jake, father and full-time employee, is pursuing a degree due to the financial support of his employer and the likeliness of a promotion upon his graduation. Lacey, mother of five, works 24-hour shifts and is unable to plan to attend classes at specific times of any day. Mary, a mother of a toddler, works full-time and has to complete her coursework very late at night or whenever she can work it in. Only five of the 20 participants did not maintain employment in addition to their coursework. However, only one of those students was single, managing only his or her academic responsibilities. The other four participants handled all major responsibilities within his or her home while a spouse or other family members worked outside the home.

**Summary of Findings**

The chapter presented the findings gained from student interviews and instructor responses involved in this qualitative study, analyzed through the approach of constructivist grounded theory. Students and instructors provided various perceptions of student engagement in online courses. To better define student engagement, I reviewed individual definitions, engaging activities, and challenges of engaging online. The next chapter discusses these findings as they relate to previous research studies and practical application in higher education. A further
analysis of themes introduce a theoretical viewpoint that can be used in recommended practice and further research.
CHAPTER 5
INTERPRETATION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research study was to determine how online students define engagement in their online coursework. In this final chapter, I discuss the findings from this qualitative case study. By applying a constructivist grounded theory approach, I sought to gain a better understanding of online student engagement by an in-depth analysis of individual perceptions shared by currently enrolled online students and their instructors. The study was performed to investigate the following research questions:

(a) How do online students define engagement in online coursework?

(b) What aspects of online learning do students perceive to be engaging?

(c) What are the challenges to engagement online?

**Research Question 1: How do online students define engagement in online coursework?**

Participants defined engagement in various ways, using a variety of descriptions and examples. In order to develop a definition in the most concise manner, I analyzed their definitions by implementing several stages of initial and focused coding. After much deliberation, I decided to organize the findings into three main themes that emerged from the data. Students involved in this study define engagement by referencing the completion of coursework, communicating with instructors and peers, and individual application.

**Completion of course**

Overwhelmingly, both distance learners and traditional campus students defined engagement in an online course as the process of completing assignments and related
assessments. The understanding is in line with Robinson and Hullinger’s (2008) definition referring to student engagement as the “time and physical energy that students expend on activities in their academic experience” (p. 101). Students in this study referred to the weekly logins that prompted them to complete required discussions and assignments as the key indicators of their engagement. This compliments the definition of cognitive engagement that describes the term as an investment in course activities, whether it is for short-term goals or long-term understanding of specific content (Fredericks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Pilotti, Anderson, Hardy, Murphy, & Vincent, 2017). Fredericks, et al. (2004) explained that cognitive engagement may include a “self-regulation” that applies strategy in learning or may become a “psychological investment in learning,” both of which are often related to motivational theories of learning as well (p. 63-64). Several online students in this study referred to this idea of self-regulation by acknowledging that online learners are responsible for putting forth individual effort to properly manage their time and resources without depending on their instructor, peers or even family members.

Even though the majority of students feel coursework is an important aspect of engagement, only 5 out of 20 students defined engagement by this characteristic alone. The five participants, three of which were campus students, perceived completing coursework to be the only aspect of engagement, but also have the current privilege of engaging with other students in traditional campus classes or other campus activities. Traditional-aged campus students might take for granted that they are engaged with other students outside of the classroom more than true distance learners. Due to their location, which is sometimes miles away from the college campus, distance learners are unable to participate in campus events or meet students that are enrolled in their classes. Campus students, particularly the ones included in this study, chose to
take this course because it provided them with flexibility and convenience of completing this required course in an online format.

The two online learners who defined engagement solely as completion of coursework later made statements that explained their focus on completing assignments due to family or work obligations. Both students claimed to be engaged in this specific course because they enjoyed the various topics included in the course as well as the interactions with the instructor and classmates. In my opinion, online learners are more likely to be engaged in the coursework due the reward of completing the required activities. Online learners who are adults juggling many other responsibilities, prioritize their efforts by completing assignments that contribute to their final grade in the course. This became evident in data within this study as the majority of participants were mostly motivated by course grades and the reward of earning their bachelor’s degree.

**Communication with instructor and peers**

As indicated by the participants of this study, communication within an online classroom is an important factor of student engagement. Communication, sometimes referred to as interaction by the participants, was referenced by well over half of the students. Data presented in this qualitative study supports findings offered in previous research, as indicated in the literature review. Kuh et al. (2005) considered interaction with the instructors and classmates to be an important aspect of active and collaborative learning, which leads to higher levels of engagement. Several of those interviewed felt they did benefit from communication with both the instructor and peers by gaining encouragement, understanding of different viewpoints, and a higher level of critical thinking.
Although, online learners may not expect to actively engage with other students (Angelino et al., 2007; Holley & Taylor, 2009), many students in this study expressed their surprise in how much they enjoyed getting to know other students and learning the various insights provided in classroom discussions. Many true distance learners explained how they now interact with peers outside of what is required in a classroom by joining social media groups or phone applications such as Group Me. A couple of students shared their excitement in getting to meet classmates and faculty at a national conference that was encouraged by their academic department. The students who shared these experiences not only used collaboration with peers and faculty when defining engagement but also reported high levels of engagement in GES 300 and overall satisfaction in their online experience as a whole. For the few students who did not perceive interaction with peers to be important, they justified that communication with peers was less desired due to their introverted personality or lack of desire to really get to know other students.

Responses to faculty interaction and feedback also proved to be extremely important to students involved in these interviews. Every single participant agreed that feedback from instructors led to a higher level of engagement. This understanding supports previous findings offered by various scholars (Bangert, 2004; Dixson, 2010; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Lundberg & Seridan, 2015; Roby et al., 2014; Sarder, 2014). Five participants in this study, all online learners, indicated that they felt engaged in this specific course based solely on the interaction with the instructor of the course. These participants shared detailed interactions in which the instructor provided support, clarity, or motivation that encouraged them to perform at a higher level in the course. Data presented in interviews supported previous findings that indicated the instructor does in fact have a huge impact on the overall level of engagement experienced in an
online course (Aykol & Garrison, 2008; Cho & Tobias, 2016; deNoyelles et al., 2014). The majority of those interviewed shared that the instructor of the course supported engagement by providing detailed feedback through comments on assignments and direct email responses in a timely manner.

**Learning content individually**

Previous studies have suggested that engagement may vary based on the direct influence on the student as an individual (Kearsley & Sneiderman, 1998; Kim & Frick, 2011; Wyatt, 2011; Yoo & Huang, 2013). This proved to be true for these online students as well. Over half of the students indicated that they were more motivated to engage in the course if the content or assignment was interesting to them. Students indicated they do not get much out of “busy work,” but will complete assignments ahead of time if they are fun or interesting. This concept reveals that instructors may get more involvement from students if they present a variety of assignments that may adapt to a variety of individual learning styles and interests.

A couple of students in this study stated that engagement was directly related to their personality and other students shared that they were more engaged in courses that specifically related to courses that were required for their major program. One instructor said that a challenge of getting students to engage in GES 300 was due to GES not being a major-specific course, but rather a more general course required of all students enrolled in this college. She said that engagement depends on “how much a student wants to learn from the course.” Researchers have also indicated that developing assignments that attract a student’s interest is an important factor to engage a student (Lim, 2004; Keller, 1987; Keller, 2010; Milman & Wessmiller, 2016; O’Brien et al., 2008). O’Brien et al. (2008) found that a student’s personal interest leads to greater attention toward the course activities at hand. Just as Chih-Yuan and Rueda (2012)
discovered, participants who expressed interest in the activities of this specific course also considered themselves to be engaged in coursework throughout the semester.

For this group, the level of challenge or necessary effort also seemed to affect their perception of engagement in online coursework. While the majority of participants reported engagement in this course, many also said that they were more engaged in other courses required of their major “because [they] have to be.” Students explained that readings and assignments in this course were less difficult and therefore required less of their time than more challenging courses. This idea relates back to the idea of the measurability of engagement. Several students defined engagement as “time spent” or “how many times…” it takes them on an individual basis to complete the necessary requirements of a class.

**Research Question 2: What aspects of online learning do students perceive to be engaging?**

In general, the participants of this study agreed which activities in this specific course were most engaging. Discussion boards, one of the most popular activities in an online learning environment, proved to be popular in this class. In addition to discussion threads, students also shared their fondness of video lectures and structured individual assignments. All three aspects are discussed in this section.

**Discussion Boards**

While not every student enjoyed posting comments on discussion threads, all recognized the value of participating in this collaborative effort. Students enjoyed getting to know other students through introductions and even built connections with students who possessed the same major or career goals. Several participants also shared they appreciated the challenge of developing new ideas and feedback by posting on others’ comments. I think discussion boards contribute to engagement in several ways. Conversations encourage students to think more
critically about course content and challenge them to put in at least the same, if not more, effort than their peers. In agreement with Angelino et al. (2007) it can also help students relate to other classmates and overcome the obstacles of isolation and lack of support that distance learners often report.

**Video Lectures**

Students, including both true distance learners and traditional campus students, spoke to the preference of video recorded lectures and feedback. Twelve students included video lectures as an activity that resulted in positive engagement. Technology now provides the ability to record instructors as they present lectures and have specific conversations with students. Students explained that video lectures address a variety of learning styles and provide a more interesting presentation of content. Several participants even recommended that providing archived links to every lecture in an online course is very helpful. They appreciate the flexibility in watching a video at their own pace, which may involve rewinding or pausing, to ensure that the content was understood correctly or notes were written correctly. One student also said that she really liked recorded lectures in which the instructor was actually presenting to a classroom of students. She mentioned that she felt like she was sitting in a classroom as a traditional college student. Campus students may take for granted the luxury of listening and visually seeing a person lecturing at the front of a room. For distance learners, it is somewhat of a gift to be able to see and hear a person deliver course content. Gray and DiLoreto (2016) learned that video lectures provide the opportunity for students to get to know their professors in a more personal way. Sherer and Shea (2011) offer several examples of how video can be incorporated in an online learning environment. Whether providing lectures, giving individual feedback, or
providing additional resources for group collaboration, students in this study confirmed they would appreciate more video related activities to enhance engagement in their online classroom.

**Individual Structured Assignments**

Participants indicated that engaging activities do not necessarily have to be only those activities that require collaboration with other students. When asked what activities were most engaging, several students mentioned that they enjoyed simple writing assignments involving specific guidelines along with the ability to include personal research and reflection. Once again, I think these references relate to the importance of individual interest and the ability to practice individual talents. Participants also shared they appreciate diversity in course activities, so they are not completing the same type of coursework every single week. Several referenced boredom created from the same routine of reading or lecture, along with discussion post and quiz, week after week. Students also enjoyed assignments that allowed them to research current topics, events, or even political discussions.

In addition to structured writing assignments, many students described engaging activities as ones that allowed them to complete exercises or projects that could be applied out of the classroom in real-life scenarios. In GES 300, participants mentioned two particular assignments that they greatly appreciated. For one activity, they were asked to develop their personal resume and then send to one classmate and the instructor for individual feedback. The second activity allowed them to use the improved resume to create a profile on the social media outlet, LinkedIn. Students were particularly fond of these assignments because it added value to their life and future career, regardless of their major. Other students referenced activities that were specific to their major and allowed them to research local organizations or potential careers. Each of these activities can be adapted to provide personal and individualized benefit for the
Research Question 3: What are the challenges to engagement online?

Although I did not specifically ask participants to share their challenges to engagement, they willingly shared their concerns in response to many of the direct questions included in the interview protocol. As previous research indicated (Beffa-Negrini et al., 2002; Berge, 1998; Dixson, 2010; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Gray & DiLoreto, 2016; Meyer, 2014; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Roby et al., 2013; Wyatt, 2011), participants of this study also struggled with feelings of isolation, technological difficulties, and personal obstacles created from family and work obligations. For most students, at least one aspect affected their ability to engage at the highest level.

Isolation

Over half of the participants mentioned feelings of isolation as a student completing online coursework. This included both campus students and distance learners. For the majority of the students, they felt a sense of isolation due to the lapse of time in communicating with the instructor or classmates. Distance learners shared that the institutions sometimes fail to acknowledge that online students are not able to participate in advertised activities happening on campus. Instead of making them feel like a part of campus, it just reminded this student that she is very distant from campus life. She explained that her academic advisor also advises traditional campus students and sometimes treats her as a traditional student instead of an adult distance learner with very different student experiences. Another student reported a situation of being mistakenly accused of wrong doing due to the lack of communication and ability to explain a difficult circumstance with a faculty member. Several students claimed that discussion boards do
help fill the void of isolation, but still do not replace the ability to have face-to-face
conversations with students having similar experiences as their own.

Some comments made me realize small aspects of communication that can be taken for
granted if you have never experienced education through the eyes of a distance learner. One
student disclosed her excitement due to a faculty member including a picture of him on the
course syllabus. She stated, “I know that sounds weird, but we don’t get to see our instructors
face-to-face so it does help put a face to the instructor’s name.” Another student claimed that it is
necessary to complete assignments several days ahead of the due date in order to allow time to
contact the instructor if instructions are not clear. They explained their inability to just approach
the instructor after the meeting. These statements might encourage other instructors to make
these small efforts to help students feel more connected to the instructor.

**Technological Difficulties**

Interviews for this study were conducted by using technology provided within their
learning management system. To my surprise, very few students had used Blackboard
Collaborate prior to these online interviews. The majority of participants expressed challenges in
setting up their account, logging into the system, and then even accessing the specific buttons to
enable video and sound for participation. Fortunately, I was able to direct each student to
overcome each challenge and all students were able to successfully complete the interview
process. Completing the interviews seemed to present further challenges as we experienced
technical difficulties many times due to sound and delay of transmission. Throughout the process
of completing these interviews, I contemplated how frustrating technical issues must become for
a distance learner if they had to deal with such difficulties on a regular basis.
Many students did share other technological difficulties involved in their online coursework. Most related to accessibility issues while completing online assessments or proctored exams. Other students shared frustration in having to find necessary information on a website that was overwhelming to navigate. Several older students, who haven’t had the training of new technologies, shared that their struggle of learning new technology had become more difficult than even learning the content offered within their courses. For me, it is concerning to hear that such an obstacle can hinder their ability to learn. When students mentioned technology in this study, it was mostly referred in only negative ways. These findings relate to previous research studies as well (Berge, 1998; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009).

**Personal Obstacles**

As one participant declared, “As a distance learner, I have more things on me than I ever did when I attended on campus.” The statement proved to be true for the majority of distance learners involved in this study. Students, who pursue online degree programs, often choose these programs due to the flexibility that allows them to manage other responsibilities including family or employment obligations. As matter of fact, 15 out of 20 participants of this study maintained at least part-time employment while also completing coursework. Half of all participants were managing family responsibilities. Additional responsibilities naturally affect the time and mental ability that these students can devote to their online studies. Distance learners might engage differently if they had less responsibilities and priorities outside of academics. The difficulty in managing time and responsibilities likely affects their desire and ability to interact with classmates (Lundberg & Sheridan, 2015).
Theory Development

An analysis of data obtained through this qualitative case study, led me to develop a new theory of student engagement as it applies to online learners enrolled in online degree programs. Three main themes were identified to develop this new concept. I propose that online learners develop an individual understanding of engagement by incorporating their own perception of engagement, personal feelings of engagement, and a process of online engagement.

The Perception of Online Engagement

An analysis of data presented in this case study revealed that online students have preconceived notions of engagement based upon their personal experiences. Students enrolled in online degree programs often have previous academic experiences in which they could reflect back on student engagement. Whether these experiences took place in a high school environment or on a traditional college campus, it is likely that students have already developed some type of opinion in the definition of engagement. Distance learners, often being older adult students, may have reservations as to whether the same type of engagement can be experienced in an online environment. Skepticism may lead to uncertainty in defining engagement in a virtual classroom. Some students may enter an online environment and expect to experience the same type of engagement as they did in their previous environment. In order to avoid disappointment if expectations cannot be met, I think it is important students are made aware of course expectations and challenges related to engagement in an online classroom. A positive perception of engagement is likely to lead to higher levels of engagement within the online learning environment.

The Feeling of Online Engagement
When participants of this study defined engagement, they often qualified their definition by referencing their explanation as a personal feeling. Once again, I gathered each description as a very personal encounter of their academic experiences. Students described feelings of engagement by how much they were interested in coursework or interacting with their instructor and peers. Their interest, motivated by a variety of aspects, lead to their commitment and attention in completing required activities. Students decided how much effort they wanted to devote to certain projects by their personal investment in the task at hand. How they felt about a topic or activity was most often related to the level of engagement they felt in the course as a whole. The connection they had to an individual activity, to their instructor, or to a classmate was measured by how the encounter affected them on a personal level. For example, “busy work” was referred to a wasteful effort because it did not apply to real-life scenarios that could benefit them in the future. Feedback from classmates was considered unnecessary because they will likely never be able to personally meet or relate to this individual. Detailed feedback and quick response time from a faculty member resulted in a positive opinion of instructor’s interaction because the student felt recognized and valued in the class.

**The Process of Online Engagement**

To properly engage in coursework, it’s not enough to only have a perception and individual feeling of what engagement involves. As decades of research has provided, students must still take action in the learning experience as a whole. To properly engage in online coursework, students must determine their own level of participation and effort in completing activities, assignments, and assessments. According to the students in this study, their level of engagement may vary, but they still have to complete the process of engagement, which often includes participation in activities and retaining the information necessary to be successful in the
course. According to participants of this study, engagement includes doing the work, communicating with instructor and classmates, and learning the content on an individual basis. However, not one student gave the same definition as another student, which again lends to the opinion that the process of engagement in a very individual encounter. What constitutes engagement for one person may not apply to another individual in the same way. I propose that student engagement is actually built upon a student’s perception as it relates to their individual feelings of how engagement relates to them directly. Students likely engage differently and on many different levels throughout their academic journey. It is a responsibility of the student to determine how to engage in their online courses in a way that provides the greatest benefit and ultimate success in their online learning experience. The highest level of online engagement is accomplished where these three aspects become as one central understanding as indicated in figure below:

Figure 5.1 Student Engagement in Online Learning
Implications for Practice

Although students ultimately manage their engagement in an online course, administration and instructors can offer activities and resources that assist students in their online engagement. Based on experiences and recommendations shared in this qualitative study, I would like to recommend the following implications for practice within online learning environments.

Require Discussion Boards

For decades, many scholars have shared the positive results of student participation in discussion boards offered in online classrooms (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Hoskins, 2012; Meyer, 2014; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Theide, 2012). They have become simple ways to initiate conversations within an online classroom. Students’ responses in this study also indicated that discussion boards are perceived to be valuable in creating a learning environment that motivates and supports engagement within an online classroom. However, as several students shared, students are only likely to participate in discussion boards if they are required and contribute to the overall earning of points or grade for each specific course. With course points as a motivating factor, online instructors can require participation in discussion threads that encourage personal reflections and insightful information for all students in a virtual classroom.

Provide a Diversity of Activities

Several students expressed sincere disappointment in performing the same academic routine for each learning module. Students explained they are often asked to view a lecture, read a chapter, complete a worksheet, and then post on a discussion thread week after week. Instead of requiring the same actions for each learning objective, online instructors should find innovative ways to include a diversity of assignments and activities in their courses to meet the
specific needs of this unique population. Every student possesses various learning styles and by offering different types of assignments, instructors are more likely to address the specific needs of more individuals within this diverse population. Several students shared an increase in their motivation when completing assignments that allowed them to learn a new skill that could be applied in a real-world scenario. Providing different types of assignments, or learning experiences, will likely intrigue students and encourage them to utilize new talents and technology.

**Deliver Regular Announcements/Emails**

Each of the 20 participants spoke to the importance of instructor communication. Several students mentioned the desire to have more regular communication from their instructor regarding due dates, important events, and assignment feedback. Instructors should consider creating regular announcements by posting on a course discussion board, blog, or even email. Many learning management systems allow you to create special messages that can be sent in batches and even programmed to be distributed on a specific day or time. These messages can be created during the development of the online course and therefore would require little attention from the instructor during the actual semester that the course is being taught. However, such an effort could create a feeling of encouragement and support from the instructor. Students involved in this study felt that emails should be responded to within no more than 24 hours. Participants of GES 300 felt a greater sense of engagement from their instructors because they did respond in such a timely manner.

**Record Audio/Video Recorded Lectures**

Twelve participants, both true distance learners and traditional campus students, spoke to their fondness of listening to lectures that were audio and/or video recorded. Students suggested
that it not only motivates them to engage more intently in content, but it helps them learn the information better because it addresses their various learning styles. Students not only enjoy hearing and seeing the instructor, but they appreciate the ability to review lectures at their own pace whether that involves pausing between slides or reviewing multiples times.

**Provide Technological Assistance**

Many participants in this study shared their frustration with dealing technology. To alleviate concerns, institutions should consider providing additional assistance through technology support who are able to communicate with students during non-traditional hours. As literature indicates, students pursuing online degree programs are often completing coursework through learning management systems administered by the institution as a whole (Beer et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2010; Coates, 2007; Ituma, 2011; Horspool & Lange, 2012; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Palmer, 2012; Revere & Kovach, 2011). A technical support team, available to assist students with immediate concerns, could reduce the level of frustration and feeling of isolation among online learners. Online instructors would also benefit from this service, as it would lessen the number of student emails reporting instances that hindered the students from completing assignments or exams (Gillett-Swan, 2017).

**Increase Awareness of Engagement**

I was somewhat surprised by the difficulty the students portrayed when trying to define student engagement in online classes. The majority of participants paused for many seconds before developing a response. Even when providing an explanation, they questioned themselves by using statements like “I don’t know” and “I guess.” As an institution, it would be helpful to provide incoming students with a mission that included the institution’s definition of engagement so that the students would better understand the concept and gain a greater appreciation for why
specific assignments and activities are required. In many cases, this could contribute to the student’s individual perception of what engagement could be in each online course. Although some online students may not want to interact with other students, it would still be helpful for them to know why the institution feels the concept to be very important. In my opinion, I see the value of including an ‘engagement premise’ in each course syllabus to make students more aware of the value of engagement.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This case study was limited to one online course required of all majors of one academic college at one public institution located in the southeastern United States. To gain an even better understanding of how students define engagement in online coursework, I recommend that additional research be conducted with the following aspects under consideration.

**Study of Academic Courses with Various Academic Departments**

GES 300 is a junior level course that is required of all students majoring in a specific academic department. I feel this study should be duplicated to include majors within other academic departments to determine if perceptions may vary depending on certain majors or shared interest of the students. Furthermore, various academic departments may provide a larger variety of assignments than offered by the one studied in this particular case study.

**Larger Class Sections**

The sections of this course were limited to approximately 40 students per section. Generally speaking, sections are fairly small for larger institutions. It would be beneficial to conduct a study that involves students enrolled in sections of one hundred or more students. I expect it to be more difficult to engage students on an individual level. Instructors likely have to
be more strategic in the assignments assigned due to the increased volume of interaction and
course load of grading submission and providing necessary feedback.

**Use Social Media/Apps**

This study indicated that students sincerely appreciate the interaction with peers outside
the classroom by using social media and other applications that can easily be accessed through
tablets or smartphones. Although only a few participants of this study used social media outside
of this classroom, I would like to research other academic programs that use social media to
engage their student cohort. The use of social media and related applications are a relatively new
concept with the online learning environment. Popularity has grown quickly, so the field would
benefit from this new contribution to the field.

**Grades as a Motivator of Engagement**

Students involved in this student reported to be highly motivated by individual course
grades and grade point averages achieved throughout entire degree program. Previous research
indicates that motivation and engagement are closely related. Additional research that focuses
directly on the relationship of student grades and a student’s perception of engagement could
assist instructors in identifying assignments and activities that result in higher levels of student
engagement.

**Results of Student Engagement**

Future research should be conducted to determine whether a student’s perception of
engagement in a course also results in success in an online course. It is possible that students
who felt they were engaged in the course did not earn a passing grade. It would be interesting to
learn how often students experience engagement in a course but are not successful in learning the
content or making a passing grade.
Conclusion

By conducting this qualitative case study, I sought to describe student perceptions of engagement in an online course required for distance education programs at a large public institution. The findings revealed through this grounded theory approach indicated that students have very individualized perceptions of student engagement. In defining engagement, participants suggested that engagement in online courses involves completing assignments, communicating with instructor and peers, and individualized learning. In addition, students interviewed in this study found discussion boards, video lectures, and individual structured assignments to be among the most engaging activities offered in this specific online course. The study also revealed certain motivations and challenges associated with online learning that contributes to students’ perception and reluctance to define student engagement in online learning. The experiences shared by students lead me to conclude that online learners develop individual definitions of online engagement by consideration of their own perceptions, personal feelings, and processes of engaging.

This study serves as a reminder that regardless of the size of classes or institutions, learning is an individual process in concert with other students and the instructor. While students have ultimate control of their engagement in online course, the data suggests institutions and online instructors can also contribute to their ability to engage by providing quality courses that offer a variety of resources. Findings suggest that incorporating discussion forums, a variety of diverse of activities, video-recorded lectures, and regular communication through frequent announcements and instructor feedback would likely enhance a student’s willingness and ability to achieve higher levels of engagement within an online learning environment. Furthermore, I
suggest that institutions raise awareness of the importance of engagement by providing college-
specific definitions of engagement to make students more aware of institutional support.

The results of this study can be used to provide higher education administrators the
ability to develop resources and create quality online courses in hopes to improve student
engagement and academic success of students enrolled in online coursework. As online
enrollments continue to grow at an even higher rate than traditional enrollments within
traditional campus programs (Seaman et al., 2018), it is important institutions become proactive
in offering stellar online courses that provide an opportunity for student satisfaction and overall
success. As an online instructor and administrator actively involved in scholarly research and
practical application, I look forward to continued research in the field of online education.
REFERENCES


Fisher, K. (2010). Online student engagement: CCSSE finds enrollment status and online experiences are key. *Community College Week, 22*(20), 7.


research and applications. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.


APPENDIX A

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about yourself and your life as an online student.
   PQ: Explain your current status as a student enrolled in an online general degree program?
   What is your major, classification, and attendance status?
   PQ: What is your overall motivation for pursuing this degree? What are your personal and career goals after completing this program?
   PQ: How old are you? Do you also maintain family responsibilities? Do you also work part-time or full-time?

2. What is your definition of engagement in an online course?

3. Using your definition, do you feel like you are engaged in the course that you are currently enrolled in? Why/Why not?
   PQ: Do you feel like you are or have been engaged in other online courses? Please explain.

4. What kind of assignments/activities do you enjoy completing in an online course?
   PQ: Can you describe an assignment that you particularly enjoyed and felt really motivated you to learn more about a topic?
   PQ: Do you prefer to work with specific directions and deadlines or rather with flexibility in completing assignments?

5. How important is it that you receive feedback or comments on your submitted assignments and quizzes?

6. Did you have the opportunity to participate in discussion threads, group assignments or team projects? If so, describe your opinion of collaborating with other students.
   PQ: Do you find them to be motivating?
   PQ: Do you think that they helped you become more engaged?

7. How does the interaction you have with your instructor affect your ability to properly engage in the online course?
   PQ: How does the interaction you have with your instructor motivate you to engage in coursework?

8. How does the interaction you have with other students in the course affect your ability to properly engage in the online course?
   PQ: How does the interaction you have with your instructor motivate you to engage in coursework?

9. What motivates you to complete course assignments? For you, is it related to applying course content, earning a grade, reaching a goal? Please explain.
PQ: How do you maintain motivation throughout an online degree program?

10. Do you have any other information that you would like to share regarding your experiences as an online student?
APPENDIX B

INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me about yourself and your experience as an instructor/faculty member.
   PQ: How long have you taught online courses?

2. What is your definition of engagement in an online course?

3. Using your definition, do you feel like students are engaged in this course? Why/Why not?
   PQ: Do you feel like this class is particularly different than any other class that you’ve previously taught? Please explain.

4. What kind of assignments/activities do you feel are most engaging in an online course?
   PQ: Can you describe an assignment that you particularly enjoyed and felt really motivated students to learn more about a topic?

5. Do you have any other information that you would like to share regarding your experiences as an online instructor?
APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTATION

November 1, 2017

Jennifer Fields Humber
Ed.D. Student, Higher Education Administration
College of Education
The University of Alabama
Box 870158

Re: IRB # 17-OR-330-A “Student Engagement in Online Courses: A Grounded Theory Case Study”

Dear Mrs. Humber,

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has reviewed the revision to your previously approved expedited protocol. The board has approved the change in your protocol.

Please remember that your protocol will expire on October 1, 2018.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director of Research Compliance Officer
Office of Research Compliance
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT FORM FOR NONMEDICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

Individual’s Consent to be in a Research Study

You are being asked to be in a research study. This study is called “Student Engagement in Online Courses”. This study is being conducted by Jennifer F. Humber, an Ed.D. student majoring in Higher Education Administration in the College of Education at the University of Alabama. Dr. Claire Major, Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, Policy and Technology Studies, will oversee and advise during this case study.

What is this study about?
To understand how student engagement applies in distance education, it is helpful to first determine the definition of student engagement as perceived by online students. Recent studies show that distance learners are less engaged in online classrooms than students who participate in a traditional classroom setting. This study will obtain student perceptions of engagement in an online course required for a distance education business program. By identifying methods of engagement, we hope to determine best practices along with additional ideas for improvement.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?
This case study will present students’ perceptions of teaching methods that promote engagement within the online classroom. Findings may provide faculty and administrators helpful knowledge to improve the quality of online courses as well as the academic success of distance learners.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?
You are 18 years of age or older and are currently participating in [ ]. As a currently enrolled distance learner or online instructor at the [ ], your perception of engagement and learning in the virtual classroom is key to the findings of this study.

How many other people will be in this study?
The investigator hopes to interview approximately twenty (20) students enrolled as a distance learner at the [ ]. In addition, three instructors, who teach online sections of [ ], will be interviewed.

What will I be asked to do in this study?
If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed using technology offered through Blackboard Collaborate, in your home or a place of your own choosing about your experiences as an online student. If you cannot access Blackboard Collaborate through your mybama student account, other technology such as Skype and Google Hangout may be used. The interviewer would like to record the interview to be sure that all your words are captured accurately. Students and instructors will be asked questions about their experiences and perception of engagement in [ ]. While this study focuses on [ ], participants are welcome to share experiences in other online courses, if they desire.
How much time will I spend being in this study?
The interview should last about 30 - 45 minutes, depending on how much information about your experiences you choose to share.

Will being in this study cost me anything?
The only cost to you from this study is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?
Participants will receive a $20 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?
The chief risk to you is that you may find the discussion of your experiences to be sad or stressful. You can control this possibility by not being in the study, by refusing to answer a particular question, or by not telling us things you find to be sad or stressful. We can also recommend a counselor to you if you seem to be upset or depressed. Seeing the counselor would be at your own expense.

What are the benefits of being in this study?
There are no direct benefits to you unless you find it pleasant or helpful to describe your experiences as a distance learner. You may also feel good about knowing that you have helped future distance learners, faculty members, and administrators by providing helpful insights to improve course development and involvement.

How will my privacy be protected?
The interview will be conducted in a private office behind closed doors. The Interviewee will be located at a place of their choosing. Interviews will be conducted using technology, such as Blackboard Collaborate, Skype and Google Hangout, created and password-protected by the student.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
The only place where your name appears in connection with this study is on email correspondence which is kept on a University secured system under password protection. Digital data will be stored on a password protected personal computer. Data will be labeled using pseudonyms, chosen by the participant or assigned by the principal investigator. When we record the interview, we will not use your name, so no one will know who you are on the digital recording. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the digital recordings will be deleted from the personal computer. This should occur within one month of the interview.

What are the alternatives to being in this study?
The only alternative is not to participate.

What are my rights as a participant?
Being in this study is totally voluntary. It is your free choice. You may choose not to be in it at all. If you start the study, you can stop at any time. Not participating or stopping participation will have no effect on your relationships with the
The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board is a committee that looks out for the ethical treatment of people in research studies. They may review the study records if they wish. This is to be sure that people in research studies are being treated fairly and that the study is being carried out as planned.

**Who do I call if I have questions or problems?**
If you have questions about this study right now, please ask them. If you have questions later on, please call Jennifer Humber at (205) 348-9146. If you have questions or complaints about your rights as a research participant, call the Research Compliance Officer of the University at 205-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066.

You may also ask questions, make a suggestion, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at [http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html](http://osp.ua.edu/site/PRCO_Welcome.html). After you participate, you are encouraged to complete the survey for research a participant that is online there, or you may ask Jennifer Humber for a copy of it. You may also e-mail us at participantoutreach@bama.ua.edu.

By completing the interview, you will provide consent as a participant in the study as well as consent to be recorded. If you do not wish to be recorded, you will be denied participation in the study.
October 2, 2017

Jennifer Humber

Re: IRB#: 17-OR-330 “Student Engagement in Online Courses: A Grounded Theory Case Study”

Dear Ms. Humber:

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. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent. 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 application will expire on October 1, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol 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, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Request for Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved stamped consent form to provide to your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Director & Research Compliance Officer
UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA
HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT FORM FOR NONMEDICAL INTERVIEW STUDY

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

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If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed using technology offered through Blackboard Collaborate, in your home or a place of your own choosing about your experiences as an online student. If you cannot access Blackboard Collaborate through your mybama student account, other technology such as Skype and Google Hangout may be used. The interviewer would like to record the interview to be sure that all your words are captured accurately. Students and instructors will be asked questions about their experiences and perception of engagement in ). While this study focuses on participants are welcome to share experiences in other online courses, if they desire.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA IRB
CONSENT FORM APPROVED: 10/1/17
EXPIRATION DATE: 10/1/2018
How much time will I spend being in this study?
The interview should last about 45-60 minutes, depending on how much information about your experiences you choose to share.

Will being in this study cost me anything?
The only cost to you from this study is your time.

Will I be compensated for being in this study?
You will not be compensated for being in this study.

What are the risks (problems or dangers) from being in this study?
The chief risk to you is that you may find the discussion of your experiences to be sad or stressful. You can control this possibility by not being in the study, by refusing to answer a particular question, or by not telling us things you find to be sad or stressful. We can also recommend a counselor to you if you seem to be upset or depressed. Seeing the counselor would be at your own expense.

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There are no direct benefits to you unless you find it pleasant or helpful to describe your experiences as a distance learner. You may also feel good about knowing that you have helped future distance learners, faculty members, and administrators by providing helpful insights to improve course development and involvement.

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The interview will be conducted in a private office behind closed doors. The Interviewee will be located at a place of their choosing. Interviews will be conducted using technology, such as Blackboard Collaborate, Skype and Google Hangout, created and password-protected by the student.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
The only place where your name appears in connection with this study is on email correspondence which is kept on a University secured system under password protection. Digital data will be stored on a password protected personal computer. Data will be labeled using pseudonyms, chosen by the participant or assigned by the principal investigator. When we record the interview, we will not use your name, so no one will know who you are on the digital recording. Once the interviews have been transcribed, the digital recordings will be deleted from the personal computer. This should occur within one month of the interview.

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