

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF INSTRUCTOR
COMMUNICATION AND INSTRUCTOR
PRESENCE ONLINE

by

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to contextualize how the communication modes I used, and my presence shape the experiences of students within a single online course. I conducted a qualitative case study in which I collected data from three sources: in-depth qualitative interviews with nine former students of the online course GBA 300, fifteen comments from two student opinions of instruction (SOI) reports, and over two hundred comments from the GBA 300 course GroupMe chat. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis and interpreted through the lens of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework with specific focus on instructor presence.

The findings of this study suggested that students' experiences were positively shaped by the communication modes I used within the course. The communication modes created an environment for interaction, learning, and participation among students and between students and me. Of the five communication modes used within the study, the discussion board, GroupMe chat, and synchronous video lectures were consistently described. These three communication modes created frequent dialogue exchange and an interactive social environment for students that facilitated students' learning, provided an opportunity for collaboration among students and between students and I, and created a course environment for open communication. The findings of this study also suggested that my presence positively shaped students' online course experiences by allowing for greater instructor immediacy and eliciting feelings of mattering among students. My social and pedagogical interaction with students was facilitated by the various communication modes creating an environment for self-disclosure, consistent feedback,

and care within the learning environment. These indicators of instructor presence elicited feelings of mattering where students felt valued, appreciated, and important within the course. By doing so, instructors can create an opportunity for students to develop interpersonal connections and collaborate with their peers and their instructor. This study provided descriptive data and served as an in-depth example that provides a potential solution to the challenges of isolation and lack of participation faced by students within the online learning environment.

DEDICATION

To my grandpa, Roy Mclean, who was always present in my big moments. Grandpa, you always gave me reassurance that I could do some great things. You always offered a listening ear as I shaped my potential future and prayers as I made my journey. As I sat in my office, writing page after page, you never missed a moment. Your dignified and encouraging face sat in my corner collectible of pens and stationery, encouraging me to keep going. Your smiling face by the window reassuring me that it was okay to take a break. Thank you again for always being present and now I am complete.

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The elevation of self comes through discipline - A summation of my life thus far

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

As a disruptive instructional change agent, online education has continued to solidify itself as a leader within the higher education landscape. Online enrollments have continued to trend upwards as more students seek the availability and flexibility to participate in a course at any time or from any place. The number of students enrolled in at least one (1) distance education course, across the fifty (50) United States of America (USA) and the District of Columbia, saw an increase of 381,549 students enrolled in twelve (12) months. With more and more students enrolling in online degree programs, there is a need for a greater understanding of student experiences within that setting. This study is timely as it seeks to explore the online learning environment from the vantage point of the instructor - student dynamic.

The role of the instructor is heavily researched within the literature, citing the benefits of academic achievement, success, expectations, intellectual inspiration, and curiosity (Ekmekci, 2013; Miller et al., 2020). Muri et al., (2019) stated that “the presence of the online teacher or instructor is vital for building interaction and connectedness between teacher and student, and student and student” (p. 264). However, students within the online environment are often disconnected from their instructor due to transactional and geographical distance. The geographical distance, while it allows students to complete their education anywhere and at any time, also restricts their ability to form interpersonal relationships with their instructor. This is referred to as transactional distance and it creates “psychological or communicative separation between instructor and learner [within] the structured or planned learning situation” (Moore,

1997, p. 1). Moore's (1993) transactional distance model posits that the learner-instructor relationship within the online environment is facilitated by three main factors: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy. One of the main ways to decrease the physical or temporal distance between the learner and the instructor is to increase the dialogue element. Moore (1993) defined dialogue as the meaningful communication between the pedagogical subjects and one where dialogic exchange is multifaceted. Therefore, this study asks two pertinent research questions:

RQ 1: How do the communication modes I used shape students' online course experience?

RQ 2: How does my presence shape students' online course experience?

For the scope of this study, my presence referred to how I socially and pedagogically interact with students within and outside the learning management system (LMS). My communication modes referred to the synchronous and asynchronous communication tools I used to facilitate instruction, establish presence, create dialogue, and generally communicate with students, both within and outside LMS (Kozark & Lum, 2015; see also Madden et al., 2017). These communication modes include:

- Email
- Synchronous video lectures
- Discussion boards
- GroupMe chat
- Asynchronous video lectures

Given the challenges students face within the online learning environment, a greater understanding of how these communication modes shape my students' course experience is needed. A case study methodological approach was employed to gain an in-depth understanding

of the communication modes I used and presence from the perspective of student formerly enrolled in my online course. Using this method, I can provide descriptive data and an in-depth example that can inform the pedagogical practices of other online faculty and create a culture of immediacy for online students.

The use of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework was used to analyze the findings of this study. The CoI framework is a social constructivist learning model that showcases the learning processes that can take place within online and blended settings. The CoI framework is grounded in optimizing the online educational experience and holds the instructor as one of the key elements in facilitating, designing, and directing a favorable learning environment (Garrison, et al., 2000). The CoI framework has three interconnected constructs: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Teaching presence is often used interchangeably with instructor presence, and thus, for the purpose of this study, instructor presence will be referenced throughout and served as the main element of inquiry. Instructor presence focuses on “how an instructor positions [themselves] socially and pedagogically in an online community” (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 259). It connects both teaching and social presence constructs within the CoI framework due the interconnectedness of these two constructs. As instructors direct and organize content within an online course, they also interact and communicate, all of which informs a student’s online course experience. The teaching and social presence construct are tied by climate setting in which the communication modes that an instructor uses within the course supports (Parker & Herrington, 2015). Therefore, using this theoretical framework, I will systematically analyze the data in relation to the concept of instructor presence and my research questions. Instructor communication within the online learning environment must be explored in order to mitigate the transactional distance and its ramifications faced by online students. The

findings of this study will provide rich and holistic data that can practically inform policies surrounding online course design and the communication modes used within and beyond the LMS. The data gathered from this study will also add another facet to the student engagement literature as scholars aim to apply and incorporate its enigmatic qualities within the online learning environment.

Background

Online education can be defined as a “form of distance education that uses computers and the Internet as the delivery mechanism, with at least 80% of the course content delivered online” (Kentnor, 2015, p. 28). The focus on course delivery via the internet has increased the reach and accessibility of education to all students worldwide, as well as the scope of the content provided. Additionally, it has also created an endless supply of institutions and companies willing to engage in the learn by distance arm’s race. Some of the major players include Coursera, edX, Edmodo, Edureka, Federic, FutureLearn, Intellipaat, iversity, Jigsaw Academy, LinkedIn, as well as traditional institutions (Harvard, Yale, NYU) among others (Astute Analytica, 2021). As students find alternative ways to educate themselves, institutions are using the viability of online education to provide an answer to the demand. This demand has created a shift in how traditional educational institutions view online education, making it equal, in terms of access, to the traditional, face to face compliment. The “cyberizing” of education, as Sener (2012) asserted, has continued to increase the global online education market as well as those who participate in it. The participation and enrollment in online education continues to increase as students find online courses more accessible given the pressures of familial and time constraints. As observed by Seaman et al. (2018) “enrollments increased for the fourteenth straight year with total distance enrollments composed of 14.9% of students (3,003,080) taking exclusively distance courses, and

16.7% (3,356,041) taking a combination of distance and non-distance courses” (p. 3). This popularity has made online education a viable area of research and the instructor - student communication dynamic an undeniable area for inquiry. Therefore, inquiry into instructor presence and instructor communication modes has the potential to improve the needs of students learning within the online environment.

The current Covid-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the movement toward online education. This forced shift to remote learning highlighted how vital a role online education plays within the higher education landscape. Institutions that were resistant to change had to accept and adopt modern technology as a means of educating students beyond the brick and mortar (Dhawan, 2020). Also, the use of innovative teaching methods by online faculty and the use of technological tools, applications, and software to facilitate online learning, have become alternatives to face to face instruction (Basilaia et al., 2020). Bob Hanson, CEO of University Professional and Continuing Education Association (UPCEA), stated that ‘the investments made in highly entrepreneurial units, charged with driving online strategy, have saved the day for higher education, positioning us for a future that may look very different’ (Pacheco, 2020, para. 9). The difference alluded to by Hansen, is one that heavily relies on online education as a core and value laden component of all higher education institutions. Therefore, a greater understanding of how instructors are informing their students' learning and satisfaction within this ever-growing online environment is vital to shaping this new future of online education. Part of that experience occurs with their instructor and through various communication modes. Therefore, by focusing on instructor presence and the communication modes used within and outside the LMS, online faculty can gain a better understanding of student learning, participation, and interaction within the online environment.

Online learning, a descendant of distance education, can be seen as a multifaceted, multimodal form of learning. Online learning is defined as “learning experienced through the internet/online computers in [an asynchronous] or synchronous classroom where students interact with instructors and other students and are not dependent on their physical location for participating in this online learning experience” (Singh & Thruman, 2019, p. 302). The need for an affordable and accessible learning experience continues to be a draw for students and an opportunity for institutions, both for-profit and non-profit, to meet the demands of their population. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated the need and priority of online learning as a major focus of educational and instructional change. This has forced and re-focused the spotlight on online learning as a valuable, accessible, and instructionally creative mode of education. Additionally, the use of technology and communication tools, not uncommon to the history of distance education, has become a part of a student’s daily interaction with content, their peers, and their instructor. As such, faculty, realizing this extension, must seek ways to incorporate both technological applications and communication modes within their pedagogical toolbox. An exploration of instructors’ communication must be undertaken in order to guide faculty in their efforts to meet the needs of online students and overcome the challenges faced by them within the online environment

Instructor Communication

The optimization of student learning is an area of focus for many institutions as online education continues its rise in numbers and tuition dollars. My research aims to expand and add to the robust literature on online student learning by focusing specifically on instructor communication modes within an online course. For the scope of this study, instructor communication modes will refer to the synchronous and asynchronous communication tools I

used to facilitate instruction, establish presence, create dialogue, and generally communicate with students, both within and outside the learning management system (LMS) (Kozark & Lum, 2015; see also Madden et al., 2017). The focus on instructor communication is due in part to the role of the instructor as the creator, facilitator, and community builder within an online course. Instructors often implement communication elements to support student learning and experiences within the course. These actions have the ability to shape a student's experience from participation, to learning, and satisfaction within the online course (Baker, 2020; Barry, 2017). Communication modes both within and outside the LMS present an opportunity for an instructor to connect and engage with their online students. These modes vary the communication that takes place within an online course producing connection, immediacy, and interaction between students and their instructor (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019).

Email

Email is one of the most traditional forms of communication due to its stability and reliability as a communication medium, and its use by the majority of the people today (Dailey-Hebert, 2018). The ubiquity of email as a communication mode is also at the center of the student to instructor communication within higher education. Hassini (2004) explained that “email offers a means of communication to students and instructors where they can channel information that would otherwise (in a classical classroom setting) be regrettably lost” (p. 39). Chang et al. (2016) stated that email is an effective way for instructors to communicate with students where “99% of institutions offering online courses use a learning management system that includes email” (p. 8). The use of email communication also enhances teaching and learning outcomes. Sheer and Fung (2007) stated that “email communication affects teaching evaluation directly and feeds interpersonal relationships, which in turn, positively influences teaching

evaluation” (p. 304). Given the commonality of email communication and the high likelihood that it will remain a permanent feature with the LMS, there needs to be a greater understanding of how this tool informs a student's experience and, if for today’s online students, it will retain its ubiquity.

Discussion Boards

Online discussion boards “provide the online learner with the opportunity for social interaction to collaboratively build knowledge” (Hoskins, 2012, p. 52). The discussion board is a key feature within a learning management system. Covelli (2017) explained that “the discussion board, as central to an online classroom, can be the ‘face’ of the learning process and the primary area where students learn, and instructors teach” (p. 140). Within the discussion board students are able to participate in a virtual asynchronous dialogue through the creation of posts and replies. This creates the potential for social engagement as students establish relationships among their peers and with their instructor. Lieberman (2018) stated that “discussion boards function along the lines of social networks that students are already using” (para. 38). The author asserted that the values of discussion boards should not be underestimated, linking the interaction within discussion forums to feelings of self-efficacy and community (Lieberman, 2018). Central to the success of the discussion board as an effective communication mode is the development of active learning and collaboration among students within the forum. This allows students to construct their own meaning from the discussion and build knowledge through interactions rather than passively receiving messages. Since the discussion board is often created and facilitated by the instructor, exploring how this mode of instructor communication shapes students' experiences with their instructor, and how it informs their experience within the course is worthwhile.

Video Communication

Video communication allows students to connect with their instructor emotionally, deepening the influence of instructor feedback (Borup et al., 2012; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). Video communication can be synchronous, using video conferencing tools or asynchronous using video lectures recorded by the instructor. Instructor recorded video lectures allow instructors to customize the content which can promote understanding (Richardson 2006) and problem-solving skills (Kay & Kletskin 2012). These recorded lectures also allow students to watch, process, and re-process content as the video can be stopped and started multiple times. These actions facilitate learner control and self-direction (Pan et al., 2012). Additionally, instructor recorded video lectures allow for the explanation of complex concepts (Evan, 2014) by the instructor where students can hear and often see their instructor, creating an authentic and engaging experience (Long et al., 2016).

The use of video conferencing tools within the online environment has been an online course feature for over the last decade. However, its use has increased given the continued proliferation of online learning and the shift to remote learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Video conferencing, tools such as Zoom, Blackboard Collaborate, Adobe Connect, Microsoft Teams, among others, have allowed for the interaction and connection among students and between students and their instructor. These conferencing tools allow students to be there without being there, either synchronously or asynchronously, as the best replication of the traditional classroom. Lowenthal et al. (2020) stated that video conferencing tools allow students to have their questions answered, receive feedback, reflect deeply on the material, build community, and decrease isolation. These benefits have the potential to motivate students to participate and interact within the course. How students perceive their instructor's use of this

communication mode can guide how instructors utilize it as they establish their presence within the online course and design the online learning space.

Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)

One of the main technological tools that students have access to is their smartphone. O’Dea (2021) reported that “93 percent of people with a college degree or higher, owned a smartphone” (para 1). The ubiquity of smartphones makes it the perfect tool for the continuation of learning and engagement beyond the physical and/or virtual classroom. This communication mode allows for mobile instant messaging (MIM), which enables students to freely exchange short, brief messages over the internet using their mobile phone. MIM provides a rich context for open and transparent interaction within an online learning environment and can provide an opportunity for the reduction in transactional distance (Gronseth & Hebert, 2018; Miller et al., 2020; So, 2016). Smartphones create an instantaneous connection among users allowing them to exchange their thoughts due to its affordances, such as portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality (Schrock, 2015). These affordances are increased by the use of communication applications, such as WhatsApp, GroupMe, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, Twitter, among others. Smartphone applications (apps) dominate the function of smartphones as almost all aspects of a student’s life can be experienced or monitored through an app. The use of communication applications is often the primary source of instant communication and provide an avenue for community building. This sense of community can be formed and maintained through the use of mobile instant messaging (MIM).

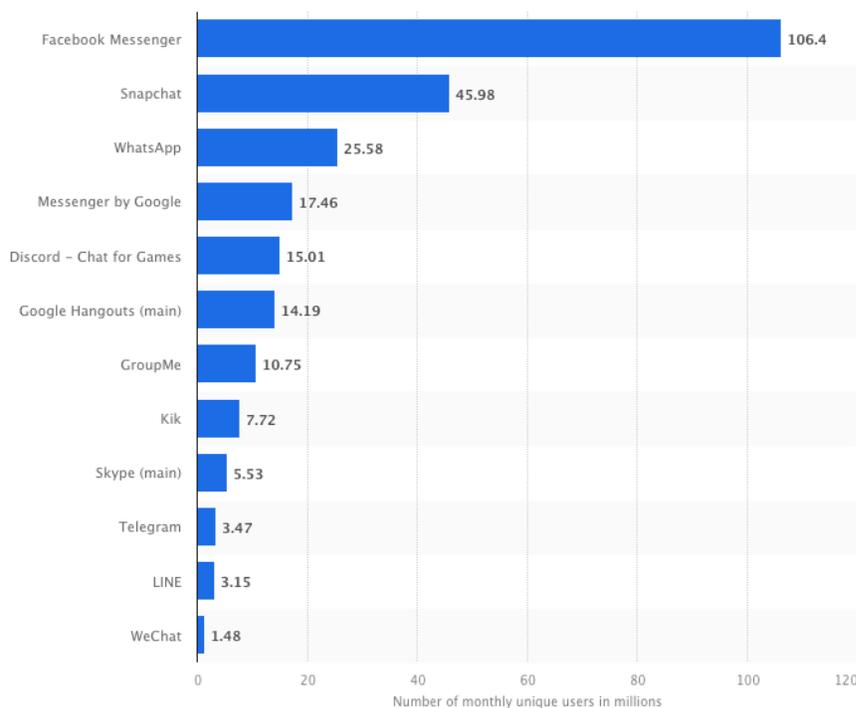
Popular MIM Applications

MIM refers to asynchronous and synchronous communication tools that use wireless networks and handheld devices, allowing students to hold conversations and exchanges

(Andujar, 2016; So, 2016). Not to be confused with short message service (SMS), which transmits text messages through a mobile service provider for a fee, MIM is transmitted via the internet. MIM tools are free and provide immediate and continued social access to whomever the device holders want to connect with (Church & Oliveira, 2013; Tang & Hew, 2017). Once thought of as purely a social tool for personal use, instant and text message communication has generated significant research as a tool for collaboration and connection among students (Lauricella & Kay, 2013; Tang & Hew, 2017). MIM tools are popular and prevalent among students due the ease at which they allow communication and connection, all due to the presence of the smartphone. The adoption of these MIM tools by millions of users in Figure 1 speaks to the ubiquitous nature of this form of communication.

Figure 1

Most popular mobile messaging apps in the United States as of September 2019, by monthly active users



The use of these MIM apps have continued to grow from informal social networking and media platforms to educational companions (Kartal, 2019; So, 2016). One of the most investigated MIM tools throughout the literature is WhatsApp (Andjar-Vaca & Cruz-Martinez, 2017; Andujar, 2016). WhatsApp is a free application for smartphone devices that allows users to send and receive voice and video messages, documents, and photos across its platform (Goodwin, 2020). WhatsApp had over 7 million global downloads in 2019 and currently boasts over 2 billion users globally (Statista Research Department, 2021). While continuing to gain popularity in the United States, WhatsApp's global reach makes it a staple MIM app for global students. GroupMe has similar capabilities to WhatsApp where users can share and receive messages, videos, pictures and documents. However, the application is geared towards facilitating large group capabilities such as creating polls, sending RSVPs. Users can communicate with other users regardless of their ability to download the app. WeChat is also a free multifunctional app used within the Asian market, especially in China, given the governmental blockage of Facebook. As a messaging application, users can share videos and photos similar to WhatsApp. However, WeChat's functionality goes beyond messaging to gaming, payments, and as a catch all for all personal and professional needs (Kharpal, 2019).

The "free charge, cross-platform accessibility, multi-modality, and easy formation of group chats" allows users to easily communicate and collaborate through these MIM apps (Tang & Hew, 2017, p. 87). Therefore, further research into MIM apps should be explored as a conduit for student learning, participation and interaction within the online learning environment. Andujar (2016) explained that "MIM constitutes one of the functionalities which holds great potential in a mobile phone; typed messages have evolved to become a new hybrid of spoken,

written, and electronic chat discourse” (p. 63). Therefore, it is important to create rich data that explores how the use of these communication applications by instructor shape students’ online course experiences outside the LMS.

The use of communication modes that focus on instant communication and messaging has gained popularity as a means of connecting and collaborating with students. However, their full potential and use within online teaching and learning remains untapped. For faculty, the “academic uncertainty about MIM apps is often predicated on its perceived distracting nature and potential to trigger off-task social behaviors (Rambre & Bere, 2013). However, this study can help faculty gain a better understanding of how MIM apps can be incorporated as a communication mode online and its potential support of instructor presence, confirming or denying their own perceptions.

Statement of the Problem

The online learning environment is paradoxical in that it provides opportunities for learning without restriction yet constricts interaction due to distance. From a constructivist perspective, learning and social interaction are intertwined and key to knowledge development (Vygotsky, 178). This means that learning is an active process. However, in the online learning environment, students are often faced with isolation and limited interpersonal connection due to their geographical location and varied time zones. Separated from their peers and their instructor, both physically and socially, students feel disconnected and alone. This feeling can lead to lack of participation, motivation, and persistence in completing their courses (Gillet - Swan, 2017; Kebritchi et al., 2017). This problem cannot continue if institutions expect students studying within the online learning environment to be successful. Therefore, there needs to be greater attention to finding solutions to the problem of isolation and lack of interpersonal connection

experienced by online students. This study will provide descriptive data that explores how my communication modes and presence shape the experiences of students within a single online course as a potential solution. This study will create a deeper understanding of what informs student learning, participation and satisfaction with an online course. Additionally, the use of student's perspectives can inform the pedagogical approaches of instructors as they develop, design, and conduct their online course.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to contextualize how the communication modes I used, and my presence shaped the experiences of students within a single online course.

Throughout this study, I aim to:

- Describe in what ways my presence informs student learning, participation and interaction
- Examine in what ways the communication modes I used informs student learning, participation, and interaction

The findings generated from this study seeks to inform the pedagogical practices of instructors within the online classroom by exploring the importance of instructor presence and instructor communication modes in combating the challenges faced by online students.

Significance

The online learning environment affords students the opportunity to educate themselves without boundary, however the limitless access to knowledge often leads to isolation and lack of interpersonal connection (Gillett-Swan, 2017; McInnerary & Roberts, 2004). Separated from their peers and their instructor, both physically and geographically, students feel disconnected and alone. The data yielded from this study has the potential to mitigate some of the problems

affecting student persistence and success within the online learning environment. If there is an opportunity for online students to form greater connections within their online courses, then research in this area must be conducted. Neglecting to study this aspect of a student's online course would limit the opportunity for students' voices to have greater representation in the design and development of online courses. Since most of a student's experience is grounded both within the learning management systems (LMS) and with their instructor, inquiry into instructor communication modes has the potential to deepen instructor presence and bolster a student's online learning experience.

The findings from this study will allow for an increase in the quality of online teaching, as well as online course design by creating a win-win situation for all stakeholders involved. The findings from this study benefit three main audiences - faculty, students, and administrators. First, the findings from this study benefit faculty, including myself, looking to design and develop online courses that have a high level of interactivity. The findings of this study will allow instructors to apply the elements of this study to their own course by analyzing the ways in which they develop and establish their presence online. This will allow faculty to re-think their communication strategy within the online learning environment in support of student interactivity and engagement.

Second, the findings from this study benefit students as they will have the opportunity to enter an online learning environment that is aware of the challenges they face and is designed to mitigate those challenges. This will create an opportunity for students to develop interpersonal connections and collaborate with their peers and their instructor. Students will also have the opportunity to extend their interactions with the peers and instructor beyond the LMS which has

the potential to create continued participation, improve student experience, and encourage the desire to persist.

Third, administrators and/or directors of online programs also benefit from this study. The findings from this study can offer the opportunity to implement reliable online techniques into their online faculty training programs. This will ground their faculty in sound pedagogical practices that will be rewarding to their students and motivate their success within the institution. The more successful the institution, the more students will be encouraged to enroll.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

With online education open to a diverse population of students, institutions can expect to instruct a varying clientele with different cultural and educational backgrounds. The convenience and flexibility of enrolling in an online course can be quickly undercut given the challenges online learners face within that environment. Some of these challenges include isolation and lack of participation (Kebritchi et. al., 2017). These challenges created a gap between learner participation and learner persistence and varies from one learner to the next. It is these challenges that support the need for this study to explore how the communication modes I used, and my presence as the instructor of a single online course, shaped student's online course experience. The in-depth focus on instructor communication modes and instructor presence, within the online learning environment, is timely given the proliferation of online enrollment. This study provided rich, holistic data that has the potential to yield insight in mitigating the challenges expressed above.

This review of literature examined studies related to students within the online learning environment and focused specifically on aspects of communication, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks tied to a student's online course experience. I examined the relevancy of this study, within the extant literature, as a means of addressing the gap in the literature and informing the methodology of this study. This chapter will begin with an analysis of studies related to the challenges faced by online learners. Then, examine the factors supporting student success within the online environment. Next, a review of the communication modes that

facilitated my communication and presence within the online course will situate the focus of this case study. This chapter will conclude with an overview of my epistemological belief which guides my approach to research as well as an overview of the Community of Inquiry model which serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Challenges faced by Online Learners

Isolation

The online learning environment allows students the flexibility to achieve their educational goals while tackling personal and social obligations. This choice of flexible learning creates a separation from peers and the instructor, leading to feelings of isolation (Gillett-Swan, 2017). Budiman (2018) conducted a longitudinal cohort study, using qualitative methods, to understand the factors that cause students to drop out of a first year online writing program. The author sampled students registered for an online writing course at a University in Indonesia as well as online tutors within the program. The cohort was sampled over four stages and data was collected using both open ended survey questions and semi-structured interviews. The survey data provided the underlying reasons that students failed to persist. The semi-structured interviews were conducted, with both students and online tutors, at each stage of data collection to provide greater depth to the information from the surveys. The data was analyzed using NVivo version 10. The author found that feelings of isolation were one of the major factors impacting student ability to persist in their studies. The author found that lack of interaction from tutors, coupled with family and personal obligations resulted in students' resignation from their studies. Budiman's (2018) findings recommended the need for greater interaction and connectedness as a means of overcoming this challenge within the online course room. This result was supported by Boateng and Boadu's (2013) quantitative study, at the University of the Cape Coast in Ghana, that analyzed factors impacting the attrition rate of distance learners. The authors used a

descriptive survey design and sampled 360 final year education students, and 100 basic tutors from the region. Their findings produced a constellation of factors impacting attrition rates from institutional and psychological, to situational factors. The authors concluded that while all the factors could not be resolved with one solution, they did contend that “early faculty contact and interaction with peers and faculty could readily address and improve learning outcomes for distance learners” (Boateng & Boadu, 2013, p. 226). The authors reiterated the need for interaction among online students and places that task on the instructor as a means of combatting the challenges they face within the online learning environment.

McInnerary and Roberts (2004) stated that “the inability to interact freely with other students may exacerbate feelings of aloneness and provide a less-than ideal environment for successful study” (p. 73). This can affect a student's ability to persist and progress through an online program. Using the case study method, Yang et al. (2013) explored student’s dropout behavior in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC) to address the concerns expressed above. The authors stated that the challenge within the MOOC structure is in the establishment of a strong social environment for their throngs of online students. The authors found that the “lack of supportive bonds of interaction [was due to the] limited shared practices among their students” (Yang et al., 2013, p. 1). In their findings, Yang et al. (2013) called for more social engagement as a means of lowering feelings of separation and isolation. The authors recommend the use of a community structure as a means of building social bonds among students. Phirangee and Malec (2017) also explored the role of community as means of combating isolation and othering within an online course. The authors' qualitative multiple case study of six graduate students found that students felt “othered” or marginalized based on perceived factors (professional life, ethnicity, language) and this separated them from the course environment. However, when a “community is fostered, students are likely to interact with each other more often [and] such interactions may

contribute to the reduction of students' feelings of isolation and disconnection" (Phirangee & Malec, 2017, p. 169). The studies above reveal the need to build a knowledge community where all members share a sense of belonging and build a knowledge base (Goodyear & Zenios, 2007; Kebritchi et al., 2017). Isolation impacts these variables and therefore is a considerable factor when understanding the importance of instructor communication and presence within the online learning environment.

Participation

Participation is another challenge for online learners, yet it is central to learning and engagement (Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Rovai, 2002; Wenger, 1988). Wenger (1998) defined participation as both action and connection; both factors are involved in a process of taking part in and relating to others. Vonderwell and Zachariah (2005) conducted a case study on two sections of an online graduate course at a large MidWestern University. The authors explored the factors that influence learner participation through the use of multiple sources, such as questionnaires, asynchronous discussion transcripts, student-to-instructor email transcripts, and asynchronous discussion reflections. They found that learner participation was experienced through the following factors, "technology and interface, characteristics, content-area experience, student roles and instructional tasks, and information overload" (p. 222). The authors expressed the importance of considering the reciprocal role of these factors as they all influence how online students participate. The author's study concluded that online instructors must closely monitor "student participation and patterns of participation in order to identify student needs and scaffold learning accordingly" (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005, p. 225). Song et al. (2019) study connects learner participation to performance. The authors conducted a quantitative study to investigate learner participation in an online course, participation with a viral agent, and learner performance. The authors use correlation and factor analysis to analyze data collected

from fifty-six (56) students from four online graduate courses in instructional technology. The data was collected from multiple sources (LMS log data, discussion board messages, and conversation logs with the virtual agent). The authors findings showed a relationship between learner participation/interaction and their learning performance. Song et al. (2019) expressed that “interaction motivates the learner to express their opinions and encourages them to complete tasks” (p. 55). The interaction learners receive online needs to be of a high quality over quantity, and frequent.

The positive link between participation and learner satisfaction, retention, and perceived learning is recognized within the literature (Alavi & Dufner, 2005; Fredericksen et al., 2002; Rovai, 2002). However, these benefits must be cultivated by the instructor. Hrastinski (2009) noted that “participating in and feeling attached to a group is a central aspect of a sense of community [where] people who have a strong attachment to a group are more likely to participate and help others” (p. 80). Stone and Springer’s (2017) study showcased these benefits in their qualitative study that interviewed one hundred and fifty-one (151) online instructors across sixteen higher education institutions in Australia. The authors gathered data through interviews to explore the most effective ways to engage, teach, and support online students. The role the instructors played in creating an engaging and interactive online environment was paramount to student participation. The findings from their study highlighted the need for regular and prompt communication between student and teacher as a means of encouraging strong student participation. The authors explained that this kind of support allowed students to persist within the course and functioned as a contributory factor to a student’s online course experience.

Additionally, the benefits of participation and learner satisfaction can also be enhanced by the communication tools used within the LMS (Ching & Hsu, 2015; Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005), and self-regulated by the student. Ching and Hsu (2015) investigated the learner

preferences and perception of thirty-six (36) online master's students when presented with two different discussion modalities (an audio/video discussion versus a text discussion). The survey data revealed a strong preference towards audio-based technology as a modality of online participation within the discussion board. Ching and Hsu (2015) concluded that augmenting online communication and connecting with learners through the use of technology was one way to engage and satisfy students within the online environment.

Recognizing the various forms of participation and embedding the necessary elements within the course to facilitate this process effectively, is a challenge for online instructors. This is also a challenge for students in how they interact within the online learning environment and can be linked to the levels of motivation and engagement they show within their online course(s).

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy is more than simply accessing the internet, it involves:

An awareness, attitude, and ability of individuals to appropriately use digital tools and facilities to identify, access, manage, integrate, evaluate, analyze and synthesize digital resources, construct new knowledge, create media expressions, and communicate with others, in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action; and to reflect upon this process. (Martin, 2006, p. 155).

Despite the tech savvy assumption of students today, not many operate within the scope of this definition. Royle and Nilgun (2015) examined digital literacy competency in an open distance education system using a four-part survey. The results of their study supported the claim above in that learners have basic competency skills as it relates to digital literacy and thus require more training when it comes to using these tools within the learning management system.

Additionally, in her qualitative examination of the challenges facing doctoral students, Deshpande (2016) interviewed ninety-one (91) doctoral students in a Business Administration

program. The study found that technological challenges were among the factors challenging student participation and success within the online course. Deshpande (2016) found that students had issues accessing internet connectivity, downloading and accessing resources given bandwidth limitations, and navigating the learning management system (LMS). The author concluded that addressing these concerns with student training, and a greater consideration by the instructor when designing and incorporating technology within the course, would help to alleviate the learning curve.

Given the vast number of technological tools that instructors have at their disposal, choosing the right technology for their students is paramount to facilitating student learning (Gillett-Swan, 2017). The “incorporation of technology provides additional factors for consideration, in terms of teaching pedagogy and construction of learning experiences,” therefore, greater care and applicability is needed as a result of the issues surrounding digital literacy (Gillett-Swan, 2017, p. 21). McGuinness and Fulton (2019) explored the concept of digital literacy in the context of students' experiences with e-tutorials in a blended learning environment. Their case study explored the perception of digital literacy and online learning among eighty-six (86) students. The findings from this study explained the value of digital literacy as a means of reinforcing learning. However, it also highlighted the technological challenges that disrupted learning. The authors explained that for effective learning and communication to occur within a blended learning environment, instructors must be strategic in their use of digital learning objects to ensure that learning is uninterrupted. Therefore, careful consideration must be applied when online instructors choose the mode of technology for their online course room (Tang & Chaw, 2016).

Summary

Isolation, participation, and digital literacy affected online learners' ability to interact and connect within their online learning environment. These factors also prevented students from actively participating and engaging within an online course room due to the creation of spatial and temporal distance (Budiman, 2018; McInnerary & Roberts, 2004; Phirangee & Malec, 2017). This separation leaves an online learner vulnerable to limiting their participation, i.e., their action or connection, as defined by Wenger (1988), within the online course room. This lack of participation reduces a learners' persistence and success within an online course. Additionally, since the nature of online learning is facilitated by technology, understanding the impact of digital literacy and incorporating technology wisely, can reduce the isolation and lack of participation learners feel (McGuinness & Fulton, 2019). However, this responsibility is placed on the instructor to choose the right technological tools that aid students in their learning and communication within the course. With so many options available, this can be an onerous task despite adequate direction and examples of success.

This study recognizes the challenges online students face and seeks to fill the gap within the literature by conducting an in-depth case study that explores two elements, instructor communication modes and instructor presence within a single online course. Both elements place the instructor, me, in both a pedagogical and social role within the online environment. Both roles shape how students experience the online learning environment and can inform the ways students interact and connect within the online learning environment. Given the challenges online learners face, this study can provide valuable insight and a detailed example that adds depth to the literature in supporting the role of an instructor and relevance of instructor communication in shaping students' online course experience.

Factors Supporting Student Success Online

There are several contributing and interconnected factors that can support student success within the online learning environment. These factors allow online learners to be more engaged and push them to persist within their online courses. Four of these factors are related to the scope of this study and must be reviewed as a means of exploring how instructor communication and presence shape a student's online course experience. These factors are instructor immediacy, community building, and motivation.

Instructor Immediacy

Instructor or teacher immediacy is defined as the “nonverbal and verbal behaviors, which reduce the psychological and/or physical distance between teachers and students” (Christophel & Gorham, 1995, p. 292). These non-verbal interactions can be in the form of eye contact or gestures, whereas verbal interactions can be informal dialogue and/or soliciting questions from students. The level of closeness and interaction (immediacy) that students feel with their instructor can allow them to persist online and reduce their transactional distance (Moore 1973). Williams (2010) investigated the relationship between instructor immediacy and statistics anxiety. The authors surveyed seventy-six (76) graduate students majoring in various disciplines. The participants were enrolled in four sections of a graduate-level introductory statistics course in a College of Education in a large southwestern university. Employing the pre-test, post-test, control group research design, both the Statistics Anxiety Rating Scale (STARS) and the instructor immediacy scale were used to measure statistics anxiety and immediacy respectively. The results showed a significant relationship between immediacy and statistics anxiety. The author explained that “the instructor appears to have an important influence on the anxiety levels experienced by graduate students... and an instructor who practices immediacy shows the student his/her “humanness” and understanding through such behaviors” (Williams, 2010, p. 12).

Baker (2010) used empirical and quantitative methods to investigate instructor immediacy and presence in relation to student affective learning, cognition, and motivation. The authors focused on participants within the online learning environment and surveyed three hundred and seventy-seven students (141 graduate students and 236 undergraduate students) at a mid-size regional university. The results of the study found a positive correlation between instructor immediacy and student affective learning and student cognition. The author concluded that instructor presence and immediacy were related factors noting that “among the three components that make up instructor presence, verbal immediacy behaviors, [such as asking questions, using humor, addressing students by name], support the component of facilitating discourse” (Baker, 2010, p. 18).

Bialowas and Steimel (2019) investigated the impact of using video and audio content as a way of increasing instructor immediacy and presence. Two undergraduate online courses (Mass Media and Society and Communication and Theory) were selected for this study and a total of sixty-one (61) participants were surveyed as a means of measuring student perceptions of instructor immediacy using audio and video content. The authors expressed that “instructional techniques must be used in thoughtful ways to add a fuller sense of instructor immediacy in online classes” (Bialowas & Steimel, 2019, p. 358). The findings show that students felt motivated and connected to their instructor when video content (weekly announcements and assignment feedback) was used in multiple ways.

These studies provide positive support for instructor immediacy and presence in establishing relationships with students. The findings indicated the role of the instructor within the online environment as an influential factor in a student’s online experience. What these studies do not account for are the descriptive experiences students have of their instructor's immediacy efforts or their perception of their presence within the course. The studies also fail to

account for the use of communication tools and instructional strategies, within and outside the LMS, that support instructor presence. This narrative data cannot be extracted from the statistical data. Therefore, this study is poised to address these areas by adding the richness of student experiences to further explore the role of instructor communication modes and presence online.

Community within the Online Course

Rovai (2002) defined community as not bounded by a setting, but through feelings of belonging and a mutual understanding and shared support of each other. Rovai (2002) outlined four dimensions of community: “spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, i.e., learning” (p. 4). The importance of fostering a sense of community is an important element in educational contexts as it ties in with Kuh (2003) and Chickering and Gamson’s (1987) principles for student engagement. However, this can be difficult to cultivate within an online setting, even though “most online students desire routine interaction with instructors and that they perceive themselves as learning more, as a result of increased interaction” (Hathaway, 2013, p. 3).

Trespacios and Uribe-Florez (2019) conducted a mixed method study that explored the perceptions of graduate students on building a sense of community (SoC) within their online education research course. The authors focused on synchronous and asynchronous collaborative activities such as VoiceThread assignments, group discussion, and group activities. The authors collected data from twelve students using Rovai (2002) Classroom Community survey, course evaluation survey, and synchronous semi-structured interviews. Using the Community of Inquiry model as their theoretical framework, the findings of this study showed that multimodal and interactive activities support connectedness and learning, leading to a sense of community (SoC) among the participants. Trespacios and Uribe-Florez (2019) supported part of the factors that this study intends to explore, by showing the positive association between community and the

use of communication modes. However, what this study can add to the existing literature is how students view specific communication modes used within an online setting.

Community can also be defined as a “collection of people bound together for some reason and that reason defines the boundary of the community” (Schwier, 2011, p. 18-19). Members within a community are intrinsically motivated to interact, creating a strong sense of social identity (Han et al., 2019; Major, 2015). This interaction can undertake various forms: student to student, student to content, and student to teacher (Moore, 1993). Berry (2017) conducted a qualitative case study that explored the ways online instructors help students create a learning community. The author focused on a single doctoral education online course at a major university on the West Coast. The author collected three sources of data (archived digital video recordings of the biweekly sessions of four courses, threads from the message boards of the four online courses, and interviews with 13 students) then engaged in content analysis. The findings showcased that a sense of community occurred in three ways, by creating a warm and welcoming tone in the classroom, using technology in multiple ways to engage all students, and creating personalized learning experiences. These interactions expressed in this study are part of the foundations of good online communities as they increase a learner's willingness to engage and reduce distance. However, Berry (2017) does not explore a specific technological tool and how students perceive its usefulness in building community. Additionally, the sole focus on student perspectives does not take into account the instructor's attempts at community building. These are two areas that this study will address. By incorporating the data from a GroupMe chat as the technological component and documenting the instructor as researcher within the study, this study will add another dimension to which community is explored within the online environment.

Student Motivation

Online learners are faced with feelings of isolation and separation from peers resulting in less participation or effort in learning (Kyewski & Krämer, 2018). This can affect their level of motivation to persist within an online course. Barkley and Major (2020) defined motivation as the “feeling, interest, or enthusiasm that makes someone want to do something” (p. 16). Motivation and engagement are linked because engagement “[arises] from a mindset of high motivation and determination” (Gourlay, 2015, p. 405). Chaw and Tang’s (2019) study investigated whether positive or negative motivation impacted student engagement and whether this affected their desire to complete the course. The authors sampled one hundred and three (103) students enrolled in a business-related course in a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC). The findings show a statistically significant relationship between positive motivation and positive engagement, and this relationship leading students to complete the course. Chaw and Tang’s (2019) study reinforced that motivation drives a student's time, effort, and the energy that they apply to their studies (Mitchell, 2011).

A student's motivation can be both intrinsic or extrinsic and regulated or controlled by the student and/or the online community within a course. That online community includes their online instructor who is the first source of community building. While both factors impact a learner's motivation within the online environment, research shows greater support for intrinsic motivation (Harnett et al., 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). Stavredes (2011) defined intrinsic motivation as the “achievement of personal goals, such as building knowledge and skills or the sheer joy of learning” (p. 60). Students who are intrinsically motivated have freedom over their learning. Online students have the ability to direct their own learning and thus are intrinsically motivated due to the nature of the online learning environment (Ferrer et al., 2020; Liew, et al., 2008). Shillingford and Karlin (2013) examined the role of intrinsic motivation through the use

of the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS). The measure used a twenty-eight (28) item Likert scale to measure intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The authors sampled thirty-five (35) undergraduate students revealing a strong endorsement of intrinsic motivation in academic pursuits. Learners had a positive attitude when completing their education at their own pace and this resulted in “positive attitudes towards online learning, [where] students see the value that they can derive from studying in an online mode” (Ferrer et al., 2020, p. 4). This result connects motivation to the theory of self-determination.

The theory of self-determination states that “as individuals, we make decisions about whether to act or not on the apparent value that we determine from the task as driven by motivated actions” (Deci et al., 1991; Ferrer, et al., 2020, p. 3). These tasks are ones that can be embedded within or outside the LMS, but must increase a student’s autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Ferrer et al. (2020) investigated student motivation and engagement in higher education using the self-determination theory as a conceptual framework. Using an email survey method, the authors sampled five hundred and seventy-four (574) students enrolled in an undergraduate business course. The findings indicated that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation impacted student engagement in a significant way. Elements such as the design of an online course enhanced student’s ability to learn. Chen and Jang (2010) also drew on the self-determination theory as they investigated online learner motivation within the online environment. The authors sampled two hundred and sixty-seven (267) participants from two online certificate programs. The findings showed a mediating effect between motivation and support strategies for the online student. These strategies led to online students’ perceived autonomy, relatedness, and competency within the online course. Chen and Jang (2020) explained that there is a need for contextual support within the online course as a means of motivating students towards success. The authors stated that a student's needs must be met in

order to mitigate the anxiety and attrition that can occur within the online learning environment. Therefore, it is important that online instructors focus on including activities and using communication modes that students find valuable as a means of increasing their motivation. Understanding how communication modes motivate students to participate and interact within the online environment can yield insight for faculty as they design their courses for student success.

Motivation is frequently studied in the literature leading to the many theories and models of motivation (Kuh 2009, Garrison, 2007; Reeve 2012). This is because of the connection between motivation and human behavior (Alderfer, 1969; Herzberg, 1959; Maslow, 1943). This means that a person's needs must be met in order for them to persist or engage in a particular activity. This would suggest that motivation is an antecedent to student success since it is the "first condition to take on a learning task and is the engine that powers the process" (Mese & Sevilen, 2021, p. 12). However, the online environment presents unique challenges, therefore the need to focus on motivating online learners is paramount (Ferrer et al., 2020; Harnett et al., 2011). This study draws on the literature on motivation as a factor that can inform how students view instructor communication and presence.

Summary

The connection between student motivation and student success is well established within the literature. The research supports the idea that students must be willing to commit their effort and time to learning as a means of satisfying their intrinsic and extrinsic needs. Given the challenges experienced by online learners in their ability to persist, motivation is needed and must be a factor that is established within an online course. The support for an online community shows its benefit to boosting motivation. This can be cultivated by the instructor and/or through the communication modes used within and outside the LMS. However, this area of research

lacks depth within the literature in understanding how instructor communication modes and instructor presence shape a student's motivation, and by extension their online course experience. The studies reviewed expressed the value of creating an online community but neglected the role of the instructor in its development and the use of communication modes in its facilitation. This study seeks to address this gap by focusing on instructor communication modes and instructor presence in shaping factors related to a student's experiences, namely their experience with community building and motivation, given the connection of these concepts to students' success.

Communication Modes

Online Discussion Boards

The role of the discussion board within the LMS has received mixed reviews. There are some studies that support the use of discussion boards as a key element of interaction and community among students (Kent, 2016; Martin and Bolinger, 2018). While other researchers have critically expressed that the discussion forum suffers from the lack of active engagement despite its promise of being a tool that facilitates active learning and collaboration (Hew et al., 2010). Kent et al. (2016) conducted a quantitative study that investigated the role of interactivity as a process of knowledge construction within online discussion boards, and in particular, its association with learning outcomes. The authors sampled two hundred and thirty-one (231) students, in eight classes from four different courses. The discussion platform used was Ligilo, a hyperlinked discussion platform where discussion contributions and content items are expressed as a node in a semantic network of posts. The formation of a community is shown through the use of concept maps showing semantic relationships between peers. The authors concluded that “structuring the discussion, by the students who have created a semantic network, has positive

effects on the levels of interactivity” (Kent et al., 2016, p. 123). This study reiterated the benefits of the discussion board as a collaborative tool.

Cho and Tobias (2016) conducted a quantitative study that examined the role of online discussion in student learning experiences by measuring learner time, satisfaction, and achievement using the Community of Inquiry Model (CoI). The authors surveyed eight two (82) participants enrolled in three separate sections of a sophomore-level online course at a Midwestern university in the United States. The participants' learning experiences were compared along three experimental discussion conditions: no discussion presented, discussion presented but no instructor interaction, discussion presented with active instructor interaction. Their results showed that social interaction with instructors and peers in the learning process helped students feel socially connected to others.

The studies above highlighted the importance of online discussion boards as a means of fostering a community feel. However, the discussion board does present limitations. The forums can create stagnation in communication if not designed effectively (Covell, 2017). Additionally, since the forums are largely read and write due to the design of the learning management system (LMS), the lack of additional expressions, such as emotions, GIF ‘s and memes, limit the creation of “real” selves within the forums. Gao et al. (2013) conducted a critical analysis of thirteen (13) studies that aimed to critically evaluate the design of online discussion environments. These thirteen studies were specifically chosen because they rigorously studied and represented the current research effort on designing asynchronous discussion environments from May 2000 to May 2011. The authors coded the studies revealing four types of discussion environments: constrained environments, visualized environments, anchored environments, and combined environments. The popular threaded asynchronous discussion forum was inadequate

as it often constrained the quality of discussions among students due to the lack of focused threads or the deviation from discussion prompts. The authors stated, “it is hard to foster a focused, interactive, and in-depth asynchronous discussion in traditional threaded forums” (Gao et al., 2012, p. 470). This can have a negative impact on how students project themselves within the forum and connect with their peers (Tang & Hew, 2020). Their evaluation showcased that the four types of discussion environments listed above provide alternative synchronous discussion forums that increased student’s participation and engagement.

The research literature on discussion boards is largely quantitative leaving room for more qualitative studies that can provide student thoughts, feelings, and behaviors within the context of a discussion forum. Since discussion forums are largely constructed with the student in mind, the use of qualitative inquiry allows for a greater discussion of how instructors communicate within the discussion board and how this communication mode informs a student’s experience. Additionally, given the commonplace use of discussion forums within the LMS a deeper understanding of student perceptions of their role, and their instructor’s role and presence with the discussion board, can provide insight into how discussion forums need to be developed and facilitated to truly maximize the benefits of this communication mode.

Email

Email is a common feature of many online learning environments as a key source of instructor communication, immediacy, and relationships with students (Hasina, 2004; Sheer & Fung, 2007). The use of email within the online environment allows for quick and timely responses to any inquiry or need a student may have of their instructor. Chang et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study that sought to determine the communication preferences of students within an online course over the durations of two semesters. The authors surveyed two

hundred and thirteen (213) graduate and undergraduate education students enrolled in an online course at a university in the Midwest. The survey included demographic information as well as questions regarding their preferred method of communication with their instructor. The following list of communication modes were provided: email, course announcements, audio announcements, video links of instructor talking, posts on the discussion board, class blog posts, group texts, tweets, and online chatting via videoconferencing application. The results showed that an overwhelming majority of students preferred email communication and announcements posted within the discussion board. Chang et al. (2015) explained that students with more online course experience (taken more than four classes online) valued the ubiquity of email communication.

Chang et al. (2016) also did a follow up study that investigated the perceptions of college students regarding the wait time expected for instructors to respond to email messages. The study collected survey responses from two hundred and twenty-seven (227) students enrolled in at least one online class during two consecutive semesters. The survey included demographic information as well as statements regarding what they thought the appropriate response time should be to emails they sent to their online instructors. The results of the study concluded that students valued responsive feedback within a 24-hour timeframe. Chang et al. (2016) explained that there was a correlation between an instructor's response time and student perception of their level of activity and involvement within the course. However, it is unclear if the preference for email communication by students is due to the very nature of its commonality as a communication mode throughout one's daily life. In both studies, the authors do not provide an explanation of why students preferred this method nor how the responsive nature of an instructor's communication via email shapes their experience. Additionally, Chang et al. (2015)

also contended that students under 30 did have a preference for other communication modes such as Twitter. However, Twitter as a mode of communication is not a common tool used within online courses since it is outside the LMS. Therefore, both studies leave room for further exploration of why this method of communication is preferred and how it is being used today. Given the changing demographics of online learners and the continued popularity of social media sites and messaging apps within personal and professional spaces, understanding how instructor communication modes using tools such as email and others is a viable area of inquiry to understanding how these communication modes shape student's experiences.

Video Communication

The use of video communication, either through live video conferencing or recorded lectures, allows students the opportunity to connect with an audience outside of their own isolated learning space. Atwater et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative case study that explored student perceptions of video communication with their instructor. The authors interviewed eight graduate students enrolled in an online research and writing course for sport and recreation. The authors asked semi structured questions aimed at understanding the participants communication and feedback preferences. The authors focused on the video communication provided by the instructor of the course using the video conferencing platform Skype to meet with students at a scheduled time to discuss their written projects. The authors also explored the use of recorded video and text feedback on their written project. The results supported the use of asynchronous video feedback over text-based feedback. Atwater et al. (2017) explained that students found "video feedback [to be] more elaborate and personal, while text feedback was perceived as more convenient and concise" (p. 9). Students also enjoyed the use of the synchronous Skype calls due to the level of personal interaction and the room for relationship development with the instructor

(Atwater et al., 2017). By comparing two different communication modes within the online course, Atwater et al. (2017) highlighted the importance of understanding the instructor-student communication dynamic given the range of communication modes offered within the online learning environment. Additionally, Atwater's et al. (2017) study showcased the need for more in-depth qualitative research that focuses on student experiences with their instructor as a resource for improving learning outcomes through improving the quality of instructor-student communication.

In a similar qualitative study, McDougall (2019) echoed the important role of video conferencing in providing emotional satisfaction for students in the online learning environment. The author conducted a qualitative case study that compared both on-campus and online student perceptions of support within an introductory course. The author used both student evaluations and an online survey to gather information regarding student experiences with support within their introductory course. The student evaluations were anonymous and voluntary and provided insights into student thinking about the course and their thoughts relating to the best aspects of the course, which was coded for themes related to support. The online survey included demographic questions as well as questions specifically related to communication and delivery of course content, as themes related to the concept of support. A total of one hundred and nine (149) students participated in the survey (53 internal students and 96 online students). The results highlighted support from lectures, students, and online resources as key areas in student's emotional satisfaction. What was particularly interesting from this study was that the online students expressed greater satisfaction from the use of weekly lecture recordings and the short "talking head" overviews of modules and assignments (McDougall, 2019). The use of video lectures engendered "feelings of connection and belonging" where students found the

environment to be more personal which “highlighted the potential of the online resources, such as video lectures, in fulfilling students’ needs on a number of levels” (McDougall, 2019, p. 251). This study highlighted the potential of instructor presence, in the form of support, in elevating a student’s online course experience. While the author does not explicitly explore or frame their study around the instructor presence construct, it does leave room for my study to follow up on aspects of support that would fall under the instructor presence construct.

Social Media

The use of social media and technology within the online classroom has a role to play in extending and reinforcing the sense of community concept. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and GroupMe, have the potential to provide multiple opportunities for on-demand learning, interaction, and engagement beyond the LMS setting (Gronseth & Hebert, 2018; Junco & Loken, 2012, Kartal, 2019; McLoughlin & Lee, 2010). With the increasing need to connect with and engage students, Barkley and Major (2020) further explained that the “cost of not striving for engagement for all are simply too high” (p. 13). Therefore, the use of social media tools within the formal education space may provide a solution to overcoming some of the challenges experienced by students in the online learning environment. This exploration of how students perceive a sense of community and communication with their instructor using social media tools can channel the ubiquitous use of this tool for faculty teaching in online environments and beyond.

Kim (2017) supported the incorporation of social media as “an influential tool in building class cohesion and community among students within an educational context” in a mixed methods study (p. 63). Kim surveyed one hundred and seventy-three (173) students majoring in various degree concentrations at a small, private university in Southern California. The 32-item

survey included a mix of Likert-scale questions and open-ended questions. Kim's (2017) results showed that faculty who use social media within their course gained the added benefit of out of class communication (OCC). This out of class communication provided students with a greater sense of connection with faculty, as well as, with the course content. Therefore, students reported a higher level of satisfaction within the learning environment both formally and informally. The use of both open and closed ended questions in this data collection method reflected the importance of student experiences and their words as a contributing factor in analyzing the data.

Kelly (2019) also investigated the role of Twitter as a tool for student engagement and interaction. Kelly (2019) surveyed language students from The Open University in the UK regarding the use of Twitter as a source of building a learning community. Using the @OULanguages Twitter account, the author used virtual ethnographies to investigate the student's social interaction within the OU Twitter account. With over 35,000 followers, statistical analysis was applied to tweets related to the term OU languages. The author found a positive interaction with students and Twitter as a source of effective student satisfaction and connection. Kelly's (2019) study showed strength in its ability to situate herself within her own research. The use of the virtual ethnographies provided valuable insight into her course room culture. Kelly (2019) expressed that using Twitter within the course offered students the opportunity to "build a learning community which supports students and can also support language learning and practice" (p. 141). Rinaldo et al. (2011) echoed this the use of Twitter as a tool for student engagement in their quasi-experimental study. The authors' aim was to test whether the structured use of Twitter affected learning outcomes. The authors gathered data across two semesters from students enrolled in an undergraduate consumer behavior course. Three studies were conducted over two consecutive semesters. Study one and two employed a

survey to gather data from two hundred (200) students. Study one measured several dimensions of student learning based on pre- and post-ratings of Twitter. Study two investigated the use and content of Tweets and how students adopted the technology. Study three used a focus group discussion with fifteen (15) participants from the larger sample to gain deeper reactions to the use of Twitter with the course. The authors' findings contended that “Twitter proved to be an effective way to engage students in experiential learning by applying course material in a social media setting” (Rinaldo et al., 2011, p. 203). Therefore, the social setting can effectively influence the satisfaction of the learning community and the student’s experience.

Furthermore, Ramiez and Gillig (2018) investigated students and faculty perceptions toward computer technology and Twitter for educational use. In a quantitative study, the authors sample one hundred and seventy-seven (177) participants: 125 students and 50 faculty from a small private university in south Florida. Using the Attitudes Toward Computer Technology for Education Purpose Scale (ATCTEPS), they measured the difference in attitudes toward technology use and Twitter between students and faculty. The authors contended that the use of Twitter and computer technology was valued within the educational environment. Both students and faculty were aware of the benefits and unafraid to try the technology for educational use. Additionally, the results reflected the importance of Twitter as a means of showcasing the participants' need to learn more through the use of social media within an educational context. However, the blending of both student and faculty members within the study provided conflicting results. Students and faculty have different approaches to learning, influences of social pressures, feelings of motivation, among other variables. This cannot be unpacked from the data collected. Grouping both subjects as one discounts the uniqueness of the subject’s individuality and approach to social media within education. My study will be focused on the

experiences of students only as a means of extracting data from the audience that my background as an instructor aims to assist.

Mobile Instant Messaging Applications

As online students find ways to connect and communicate with their peers and instructors, the use of their smartphones play a key role in creating the bridge between themselves and others within the online space (So, 2016). The reliance on smart technology within a learner's everyday life has bled into their education space as well. Mobile or smartphones are indispensable technological devices among today's learners (Kartal, 2019). The popularity of mobile phones has given rise to mobile learning and the integration of mobile devices into the educational environment. This is due to the use of smartphones, tablets, and smartwatches creating accessibility to others, whether synchronously or asynchronously (Kaufmann & Peil, 2020). This focus has also urged faculty to consider incorporating mobile learning into their teaching as well.

There have been a few studies investigating the functionality of MIM as a means of increasing a learner's connection, community, learning, and presence. Bouhnik and Deshen's (2014) conducted a qualitative pilot study of twelve (12) high school teachers. Using half structured in-depth interviews, the authors explored classroom communication between teaching faculty and high school students using WhatsApp. The participants managed twenty-four (24) groups with more than four hundred (400) students. The goals of using WhatsApp within the educational context were communicating with students, grooming a positive atmosphere and a sense of belonging in the class, creating dialogue, and using and sharing a learning platform (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014, p. 223). The study revealed a sense of comfort between students and their instructor using WhatsApp. The authors expressed that instructors had a better chance at

getting to know their students through the use of MIM tools, thus reducing their air of authority (Bouhnik & Deshen, 2014).

So (2016) also investigated the use of WhatsApp in supporting the functions of teaching and learning. The authors conducted an experimental study with sixty-one (61) students from two parallel evening classes of a database management course at a teacher-training institute in Hong Kong. The participants were divided into experimental (31 students) and control groups (30) where the former used WhatsApp for teaching and learning support while the latter for administrative purposes only. So's (2016) study reflected positive support for WhatsApp as an intervening tool for the improvement of learning achievement of the participants. Andujar (2016) also highlighted the benefits of this MIM as a tool for interaction and involvement, especially in language learning. The author investigated the benefits of WhatsApp as a tool for grammatical, lexical and mechanical accuracy as well as syntactic complexity in second-language learners' writing. The author collected daily WhatsApp interactions and sampled eighty (80) Spanish students taking a B1 English course over six months. The analysis of the data focused on the interaction among students and their degree of development of their writing skills. The author's findings showcased the use of WhatsApp as a tool that encouraged second language interaction among participants by activating the participants involvement in language learning.

Additionally, Lauricella and Kay (2012) examined how students used text and instant messaging within their academic lives as a means of communication between their peers and instructors. The authors conducted a quantitative study that investigated student's comfort level with two communication modes: mobile phones and instant messaging. The authors surveyed seventy-five (75) students across three separate writing classes at a small metropolitan university. All students were provided with the instructor's phone number and were invited to

send text to communicate with the instructor and peers. They could also share their phone number to receive messages. The authors highlighted a high level of comfortability for students using text and instant messaging due to its convenience, ease of use, ability to save time, and resolve administrative issues.

Mobile instant messaging also allowed students to express themselves through video, text, or pictures, and served as a means of interacting with those within the online space. The communication between students and their instructor received a significant boost when MIM tools are integrated within the learning process. This is due to a user's ability to create immediacy and have real time communication within their instructors. Tang and Hew (2020) conducted a two - stage mixed methods study to investigate how MIM tools supported social presence and compare the difference between MIM tools and discussion forums. Sampling was taken from two classes at a large, public Asian university over two semesters. Class A was composed of 26 graduate students while Class B was composed of 29 graduate students. WeChat was the MIM tool used with the study and data were analyzed from the chat interaction and student interviews. The study revealed the benefits of MIM tools as a means of promoting the expression of emotions, expressing agreement and phatic, and providing support. The authors stated that these expressions allowed learners to feel “real”, creating a tangible presence within the online environment.

Despite the positive findings for the use of MIM tools within the literature, this area of inquiry needs further exploration on the utility and usability of these tools within the online environment outside the areas of foreign language training (Rambe & Bere, 2013; Tang & Hew, 2017). There are quite a few studies that focus on education as a second language (ESL) and the use of MIM tools for language learners to practice and train their language skills. However,

expanding beyond this subject area will help to increase the research on the functionality and potential of MIM tools all courses. Additionally, most of the studies reviewed reflect a quantitative or mixed methods approach. These studies leave absent the presence of instructors in using these tools as well as the use, feelings, and perceptions of students towards the incorporation of MIM tools in their online learning experience. The research related to MIM tools currently presents a methodological opportunity for this study to expand and generate new research grounded in qualitative inquiry. The benefits of qualitative inquiry lie in its ability to:

understand the nature of [a] setting - what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on with them, what their meanings are, what the world looks like in that particular setting - and . . . to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting. (Patton, 1985, as cited in Merriam, 1998)

Further inquiry into how MIM tools are used within an online setting has the potential to illustrate how students experience the setting, how they connect and communicate with their instructor, and what their world looks like online with the addition of MIM. Given the focus of this study on instructor communication modes and instructor presence, further inquiry into how MIM tools are used within an online classroom can also potentially shift the reliance on the LMS as the sole medium for communication and community online. This study aims to address this methodological opportunity in the hopes of directing instructors to apply MIM tools to their pedagogical toolbox.

Summary

Overall, the evidence reviewed from these studies suggest that incorporating social media within an educational context serves as an effective pedagogical tool for supporting student

connection, motivation, participation, and community building. However, the studies focus on larger social platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, that are open to students beyond the boundaries of the LMS and their immediate online course. The assessment as to whether a student is finding satisfaction from their relationship with their classmates on Twitter or with Twitter itself is not delineated in the research findings. The public nature of social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, also make it susceptible to positive student experiences by default. Students can easily opt out of the classroom connection into the public social connection with those within their network. This presents a unique opportunity for this study to specifically address this concern and add to the literature an instructor's use of a "closed" communication tool in shaping students' online course experience. The "closed" nature that exists within platforms, such as GroupMe, creates a "fence" around the online learning space similar to the door of a face-to-face classroom. This limits the outside distraction and infiltration that occurs within a public social network and therefore, has the potential to shape how a student experiences the course and how an instructor asserts their presence within the online course.

Since the formation of an online community is not bound to a setting, online communities are able to thrive and extend through the use of technology. Technological tools within the LMS such as discussion boards are able to create closed spaces for students to interact and collaborate (Kent et al., 2016). However, some students may see this setting as a more formal environment and for grade generation purposes. This can create a hesitation to showcase their true selves or become too invested within the communal space (Cho & Tobias, 2016). Technological tools outside the online course room, such as communication apps and social media networking sites, have the potential to create communal space and social presence (Wong et al., 2011). Major (2015) stated that "social presence requires being there and being seen as being there and is

achieved through communication with others” (p. 247). This sense of presence can be fostered through an instructor’s use of and communication within informal spaces using communication apps. These spaces can create a common and safe space for learners beyond the LMS by enhancing social learning and connection (Duncan et al., 2013). What is missing in the literature is how an instructor's use of MIM and how their presence within these informal spaces shape a student online experience, an area this study intends to explore.

Epistemological Belief

The Theory of Constructivism

The constructivist theory is an epistemological view of knowledge construction that guides my educational philosophy. The theory of constructivism declares that personal constructions of knowledge and meaning are acquired by the learner through experience. The theory of constructivism holds the following propositions:

- Knowledge is constructed by the learner and built upon an existing foundation of prior learning
- Learning is an active process through engagement with the world
- Learners have a distinctive view of the world which is impacted by their prior experience
- Learning takes place with meaning and authentic tasks

Constructivist learning environments can be defined using two strands: cognitive constructivism (Piaget, 1970) and social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978). Liaw (2004) defined cognitive constructivism as “knowledge constructed through assimilation and accommodation,” where social constructivism is defined as “knowledge constructed within social realms” (p. 313). The tenets of Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory guide my approach to instructional strategies and activities because it “encourages students to internalize and re-shape information through

active consideration” (Liaw, 2004, p. 313). This creates an environment where students are motivated to learn and participate within the learning environment. Additionally, constructivist learning environments “provide multiple paths for students to explore” (Keengwe, 2013, p. 889) and should be used to “provoke the kinds of thoughtful engagement where primary learning is placed on the student in a student-centered approach” (Keengwe, 2013, p. 889). The exploration of how my communication modes and my presence shape a student online course experience within a single online course focuses on their experiences and co-construction of learning within the online space. Given the challenges of distance and isolation within the online space, creating opportunities for dialogue, connection, and collaboration has the potential to create greater opportunities for social interaction and learning, a constructivist approach.

The concept of allowing students control over their learning is grounded in the constructivist realm and supported by the literature. Hathaway (2013) noted that using the constructivist learning model could facilitate the kinds of interaction and engagement needed for a deeper online learning experience. Keengwe et al. (2013) explained that constructivism “emphasizes hands-on activity-based teaching and learning in which students develop their own frames of thought” (p. 888). This creates student buy-in and connection with the course material allowing students to actively participate in knowledge creation. This is done by allowing “students [to] become more engaged in course content while they learn from their peers and instructor” (Moreillon, 2015, p. 41). Mehta et al. (2017) further supported this claim by explaining that “the instructor has to think through the course learning outcomes and then design the learning activities and lessons that would engage students and stimulate interaction” (p. 122). The exploration of both my communication modes and my presence within an online course will

provide a greater understanding of how constructivist educational philosophy is applied and experienced within the online environment.

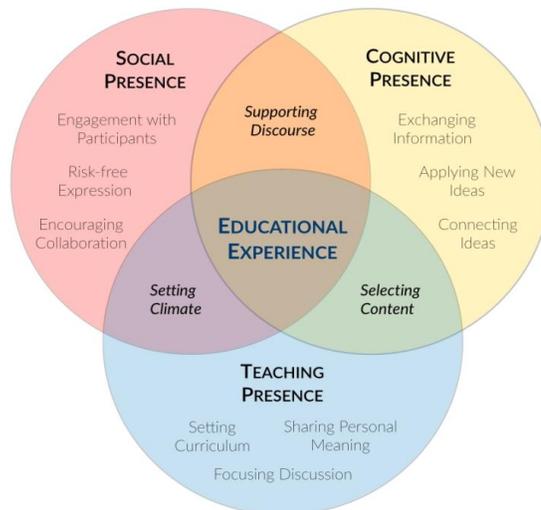
Theoretical Framework

Community of Inquiry (CoI)

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework was developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 2000 as a model for understanding online learning, teaching, and the learning process (Choo et al., 2019). It is a popular theoretical approach used when analyzing elements of a learner's educational experience. The CoI framework explains that “a group of individuals who collaboratively engage in purposeful critical discourse and reflection construct personal meaning and confirm mutual understanding” (Garrison, 2017, p. 2). This model applies the constructivist principles through the use of three elements of presence geared to understanding a learner's interactions and educational experience. These interactions are interdependent and overlap, coalescing into cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Figure 2 shows the elements of presence of the CoI model, the variables that define each presence, and how each intersect.

Figure 2

The Community of Inquiry Framework



Adapted from Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T., Archer, W. (1999) Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2), 87-105

Cognitive presence is defined as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89).

Social presence is “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94). Garrison et al. (2000) explained that social presence contains three variables:

- Emotional expression: learners are able to share and express their personality and values
- Open communication: learners recognize and understand each other in creating a mutually collaborative environment
- Group cohesion: learners build trust and commitment to the group

The research on social presence shows a positive correlation between social presence and learning where students who engaged in high social presence gained a greater understanding of the course material than those engaged in low social presence (Richardson & Swan, 2013). Additionally, social presence provides students with a sense of belonging and community (Sung & Mayer 2010), satisfaction (Bulu, 2012; Hostetter & Busch, 2006) and engagement (Cobb, 2011).

Teaching presence is “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 8). Garrison et al. (2000) stated that “appropriate cognitive and social presence, and ultimately, the establishment of a critical community of inquiry, is dependent upon the presence of a teacher” (p. 96). This places the instructor/teacher at the center

of a student's social and cognitive experiences. Teaching presence has three categories: instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction.

Instructional management refers to the design, assessment, and utilization of the instructional mediums. Mehta et al. (2017) expressed that “instructors need to be prepared to commit extensive time and effort in designing a course for online learning” if engagement is to be the outcome (p. 122). Therefore, the understanding of what instructional tools and approaches are needed “is the instructor’s responsibility [when] constructing the learning process” (Mehta et al., 2017, p.122). It is this focus on the learning process, how it can be facilitated through technology, and how it shapes student learning that creates an engaging online environment.

Building understanding refers to the creation of effective group collaboration, individual contribution, social meaning making, and focused discussion. Garrison et al. (2000) highlighted the need for instructors to be the force that guides the interaction, engagement, and support of learners. This is especially true in the online course room where the instructor is spatially and temporally separated from students. The focus on presence reduces the transactional distance created by the online environment creating a sense of togetherness (Afolabi, 2016) leading to a “co-construction of the intellectual climate shared by the instructor and students in the online course” (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017, p. 16).

Direct instruction refers to the responsibility of the teacher to provide content, discourse, reflection, and provide feedback. The role of the instructor or teacher as an engaged and active participant within any learning environment is also paramount to the participation and success of learners (Akyol & Garrison, 2011).

Understanding the role of the instructor is heavily researched within the literature, citing the benefits of academic achievement, success, intellectual inspiration, and curiosity (Ekmekci,

2013; Miller et al., 2020). Muri et al., (2019) stated that “the presence of the online teacher or instructor is vital for building interaction and connectedness between teacher and student, and student and student” (p. 264). Lambert and Fisher (2013) conducted a mixed methods study to investigate the three CoI elements in a graduate-level educational technology online course. The authors sampled fifteen (15) graduate students using an online survey and qualitative data from blogs created within the course. The findings indicated that all three elements of presence were experienced and valued within the course, with a strong preference to teaching presence. The authors expressed that “the instructor more than adequately achieved the three dimensions of teaching presence by incorporating clear course structure, strategies to build community, timely communication and feedback, explicit guidance on discourse and assignment completion, thought-provoking assignments, and intellectual and scholarly leadership” (Lambert & Fisher, 2013, p. 12). However, the teaching presence element does not simply occur because a teacher is assigned to a class, it is one that must be cultivated and requires intentionality and responsiveness (Xin, 2012). Therefore, instructors that focus on showcasing higher teaching presence are likely to be more effective in their instruction and connection with students (Baker et al., 2020).

Orcutt and Dringus (2017) supported this statement in their study that investigated the decision processes of instructors in establishing teaching presence in a structured online environment. The authors used a case study method to explore teaching presence and its implications for the intellectual climate of an online classroom of seven (7) online instructors. The experiences of these instructors were collected through semi -structured interviews and analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) tool. Their findings indicated that

Student engagement and intellectual curiosity were influenced most greatly by an instructor's active interest and passion for teaching, an ability to identify the relevance of course topics to the student, and the encouragement for a shared responsibility in the learning process. (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017, p. 30)

There must be a deliberate attempt to embed the voice and actions of instructors within an online course so that students feel the impact of this immediacy and support. Choo et al. (2019) investigated student perceptions of the CoI framework in online business courses and their relationship to students' course satisfaction. Using an online survey, the authors sampled two hundred and twenty-three (223) business undergraduate students from ten (10) undergraduate online courses in the College of Business at a public university in the Midwestern United States, across three semesters. The findings indicated that student satisfaction and learning are closely associated with teaching presence and cognitive presence. The authors expressed that "a successful community of inquiry is very closely associated with a sense of common purpose and cognitive presence that is given by instructor immediacy and direction (teaching presence)" (Choo et al., 2019, p. 178). One of the ways that instructors can establish their presence is by setting the climate. Cox-Davenport (2010) investigated the factors needed to develop a climate for teaching presence. The author found that instructors who develop an environment for open communication and those with a high level of influence were able to enhance their presence and foster greater student engagement and participation (Cox-Davenport, 2010). This ties back to the element of social presence showing the overlap of the two elements. These examples portray teaching presence as a strong predictor of student success and the foundation from which the other presences are developed

Instructor Presence

The term instructor presence is often used interchangeably with teaching presence within the literature, despite some distinct differences (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Richardson et al. (2015) explained that instructor presence occurs at the intersection of social presence and teaching presence. The authors define instructor presence as the “specific actions and behaviors taken by the instructor that project [themselves] as a real person. It how an instructor positions [themselves] socially and pedagogically in an online community” (Richardson et al.,2016, p. 259). In their descriptive multiple case study, Richardson et al. (2016) gathered data from twelve (12) instructors across three courses over a twenty-month semester. The aim of the study was to explain instructor presence, that is what it “looked like”, in online environments. The data analysis stemmed from archived course observation from the LMS (Blackboard) and included the instruction, actions, and communication that occurred within the LMS. The authors profiled each instructor and created five distinct instructional roles related to instructor presence:

- Advocating - supporting students by encouraging them through assignments
- Facilitating - Actively providing direction and ideas through discussion and participation
- Sense making - Helping students understand concepts through scaffolding and feedback
- Organizing - Providing structure through the communication of expectations and resources
- Maintaining - Undertaking administrative responsibilities such as technological concerns logistics of course content and reminder of due dates and assignment requirements

These categories were created by connecting aspects of the teaching presence and social presence as outlined by the CoI framework. The authors explained that in exhibiting teaching presence, instructors also show social presence indicators in the ways they communicated and

interacted within the online environment and with their students. Therefore, divorcing social presence from teaching presence, and confining one presence to the role of the instructor would be impractical.

My intention is to analyze the data gathered from my participants through the lens of the CoI framework, with a specific focus on the combination of the teaching and social presence elements. Instructor presence was chosen because it encompassed both the act of teaching/instructing and the persona of instructors which supported motivation, immediacy, and community, key drivers of student success (Choo et al., 2019; Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). The use of this theoretical framework will allow me to add depth to my data analysis by focusing on the meanings my participants' attach to their experiences and explaining those experiences using the instructor presence construct. Using this construct, I can increase the believability and transferability of my findings and successfully answer my research questions.

Summary

This chapter explored the challenges faced by online students as means of outlining the problem that this study aims to address. Next, the chapter reviewed the factors that support online student success to frame the importance of the role of instructor communication and presence as an area of research that needed greater attention, given its propensity for combatting the challenges students face online. The review of literature in this chapter also explored the online communication modes that facilitate instructor communication and presence, which proved to be a necessary element in supporting student motivation and persistence online. My epistemological belief and theoretical framework outlined in this chapter were productive in explaining the basis for this study and in framing the data analyzed.

The existing body of research has established the importance of investigating the online environment and student experiences. However, the studies currently presented in the literature focus on how one or more factors within the online environment statistically correlate with student success and persistence. While the studies hold great merit in researching the online learning environment, more descriptive, rich experiences and examples are needed to reflect and amplify student voices and experiences within the online environment. This study builds upon the current research by providing an in-depth analysis of how my communication modes and my presence shape students' online course experience as a means of expanding the literature on the role of instructor - student dynamic online.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The focus of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative case study that explored the communication modes I used and my presence within a single online course. This study is timely and important given the significant increases in student enrollment in online programs (see Appendix A) and the challenges students face within the online learning environment. Two of the major challenges that continue to plague online students are isolation and lack of interpersonal connection (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Stavredes, 2011). Both of these challenges have an interaction and communication element missing which resulted in the withdrawal of students from the online learning environment (Gillet - Swan, 2017). This study is focused the communication modes I used within a single online course as a means of creating an in-depth exploration of instructor communication and presence online. The applicability of the case study method and the use of the Community of Inquiry Model (CoI) are discussed in depth in this chapter as a means of exploring and framing this study. This chapter will include a discussion of my research plan which includes my methodology, participants, site selection rationale, data collection and analysis as well as the ethical concerns surrounding this study

Overall Research Approach

This study used a qualitative methodological approach to answer the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do the communication modes I used shape student's online course experiences?

RQ 2: How does my presence shape students' online course experiences?

Qualitative research is a “situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). This was the best approach for this study as it allowed me to situate myself within the world of students in an online course setting. Using this methodology, I was able to gain a better understanding of my communication and my presence from the participants’ who shared their experiences in this study. I also gained a better understanding how these factors shaped their world within the online course.

As an online course instructor, I implemented several modes of communicating with students within and outside the learning management system (LMS). My communication modes referred to the synchronous and asynchronous communication tools I used to facilitate instruction, establish presence, create dialogue, and generally communicate with students, both within and outside the LMS (Kozark & Lum, 2015; see also Madden et al., 2017). These communication modes include:

- Email
- Synchronous Video lectures (using video conferencing software)
- Discussion boards
- GroupMe chat
- Asynchronous Recorded video lectures

These communication modes were chosen for this study because they facilitated continued dialogue between students and me as well as displayed my social and pedagogical skills. These communication modes were also suited to the online learning environment due to their collaborative and interactive functionality, allowing students to connect with each other and myself, both synchronously and asynchronously. One of the primary functions of a qualitative

researcher is to “understand how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). My use of various communication modes within an online course is one such element that provided a forum for interaction and collaboration between students and myself. The use of these communication modes created varying experiences for the students involved in the course and therefore must be explored using a qualitative methodological approach in order to extract the meanings associated with their experiences.

Qualitative research is also one in which an individual's reality is constructed through interactions, and a researcher's role is to understand the meanings they have constructed (Merriam, 1998). In order to explore my communication through the perspective of students, I gathered and analyzed data that was descriptive and contextual in nature. This allowed me to document the stories and experiences of students, data that is characteristic of the qualitative approach. Additionally, the use of qualitative inquiry allowed me to “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 2). In this study, I explored the experiences, feelings, and perception of students, as they interacted with me and the communication modes I used within the online course. This afforded me the opportunity to collect informative data to understand these experiences as I spoke with and observed student interactions within the online learning environment. The data collected allowed me to “find patterns within [the] words [of my participants] and to present those patterns for others to inspect, while at the same time, staying as close to the construction of their world as the participants originally experienced it” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 18). This is a key characteristic of qualitative research and one that cannot be provided using a quantitative approach.

The use of the quantitative approach would not be beneficial to the purpose of this study. The focus of quantitative research is to test and/or predict a predetermined outcome. This removes the researcher from the natural environment of the participants, restricting their ability to share the depth of their experiences, feelings, and perceptions. The data needed could not be extracted given the data collection methods associated with quantitative research. The focus on inanimate instruments, such as scales, tests, and surveys, would limit the opportunities for students to extensively explain their experiences to a fixed, numbered questionnaire. By using qualitative research, I am the primary instrument of data collection, allowing me to be responsive and adaptive to the nuances of the situation or circumstance (Merriam, 1998). The subtleties of language and non-verbal elements often displayed in an interview setting adds richness to the data. This would be difficult to gain using quantitative methods, betraying the purpose and approach of this study.

The data collected in this study was analyzed through the lens of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model, with specific focus on the combination of the teaching and social presence construct, instructor presence. The teaching presence dimension within the CoI model includes instructor communication as a vital component for course facilitation, direction, and design (Garrison et al., 2000). The social presence dimension includes emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion, which are facilitated through the tools an instructor uses to communicate within an online course (Garrison, et al., 2000). Instructor presence, as defined by Richardson et al. (2016), is “how an instructor positions [themselves] socially and pedagogically in an online community” (p. 259). This definition more accurately described what this study intends to explore, my communication modes and my presence. The use of the instructor

presence construct as my theoretical guide allowed me to accurately analyze the stories and patterns observed from the data.

Proposed Research Design

The best method to explore my research questions is through a case study research design. My study fits the case study approach in that I am able to isolate my communication and presence (case) with a particular group of students (non-traditional learners) within a given context (specific online course) and bounded by a specific timeframe (during a 15-week academic semester). The focus on communication modes I used, and my presence placed me at the center of this study. I am “a specific, complex, functioning thing” and thus fit with Stake’s definition of a case (Stake, 1995, p. 2). The application of the case study approach is unique in that it provided knowledge that was more concrete, contextual, and developed due to my role as both object and subject. (Merriam 1998).

My interest in using the case study approach was out of a concern for the challenges that students face within the online learning environment, given my role as an online instructor. This concern placed this study within the context of an intrinsic case study. In an intrinsic case study, the “researcher is guided by [their] interest in the case itself rather than in extending theory or generalizing across cases” (Mills et al., 2010, para. 1). Using this approach allowed me to analyze my own pedagogy based on the experiences of my students. This method created a powerful research approach where I got the opportunity to reflect and take accountability for my actions within the online environment. Additionally, this study also served as an in-depth example or resource for faculty members teaching and designing online courses. The data collected can “offer insight and illuminate meanings that expand its readers’ experiences” in understanding, at large, the instructor-student communication dynamic and instructor presence

within the online learning environment (Merriam, 1988, p. 41). By gathering in-depth accounts of students' experiences within an online course, faculty members can gain a better understanding of a student's needs online and invoke change in how they communicate with their students in their own course (Stringer & Aragon, 2021).

The use of the case study research design supported the application of the Community of Inquiry model as my theoretical framework. Using the case study method, I analyzed how the communication modes I used shaped students' experiences through the construct of instructor presence. The instructor presence construct supported my understanding of learning as a social activity where the instructor is the facilitator, allowing students to build knowledge through experiences. Exploring the communication modes I used, within the bounded context of an online course, provided greater depth and insight into my role as the instructor and further supported my epistemological beliefs in constructivism.

Site Selection and Rationale

My study took place at a large, public, R1 designated university in the Southeastern United States. This site was selected because this institution has been recognized as a national leader in online education. The online programs provided at this institution are both innovative and expansive, offering both undergraduate and graduate programs in a variety of disciplines. This institution has continued to grow its online enrollment over the years, showing popularity among in-state and out-of-state students. This site was selected because of my research questions and theoretical framework, the CoI. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model focuses on the learning process within an online environment. This study occurred within the bounded context of an online course therefore, choosing this online educational site aligned with my research approach. Last, this site also provided a convenient location for sample selection given

my familiarity with the institution having been involved with this site for over twelve (12) years. I found this site had the participants needed to provide an in-depth analysis of a student's online course experience.

Course Selection and Rationale - Business Communication

The course selected for this study was a single online section of an undergraduate, business communication course (GBA 300) offered at the site selected. I chose this course because I was the online instructor for this course for 5 years in both the face to face and online capacity. I have in-depth knowledge about and experience with the course content, functionality, and design, having participated as the subject matter expert for this course throughout my tenure. I brought a unique insider vantage point, having considerable knowledge of the course and also by being the agent and creator of all the communication tools used within the course. I could speak to the nuances of the online environment, course, and instructor perspective as I explored the communication modes I used and my presence through the words of my students. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) expressed the paradoxical role of the qualitative researcher in that they are “to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others—to indwell—and at the same time be aware of how [their] own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what [they] are trying to understand” (p. 123). Situating myself in this role allowed me to become more aware of my position and biases, while keeping myself open to new experiences.

I also chose this course because I could gain insight from various degree seeking students rather than confine my findings to a specific major. This variety provided some valuable insight from students of varying academic backgrounds, pursuing a variety of academic and career goals, thereby creating greater depth within this study. Focusing specifically on this online course allowed me to gather data from participants who had proficient online learning

experience. These experiences could be effectively analyzed through the use of my theoretical framework, the CoI. I also had the opportunity to gather data from students who previously completed my undergraduate, online business communication course. These participants could speak specifically to my presence and the communication modes I used within the course. Using this course, I fulfilled the context of the case study design approach. This course allowed me to focus on an in-depth understanding of a particular situation, that being the communication modes I used and my presence within a specific online course setting.

Course Overview

GBA 300 (Business Communication) aimed to develop and improve the written and oral communication skills of students by providing real world business environments and situations. The course is offered both as an online and face to face course and is open to students pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree in Commerce and Business Administration. This course is an upper division core course, which means, students must complete sixty (61) hours of general education and lower-division requirements prior to enrolling in this course. Students in this course have a junior to senior designation given the prerequisite requirements and must complete this course in order to complete their Bachelor of Science degree in Commerce and Business Administration.

The online section of this course enrolled distance learning students only. These students were classified as non-traditional students due to a number of factors. According to Horn and Carroll (1996), “age (especially being over the age of 24) has been the defining characteristic for this population. Other factors such as background (race and gender), residence (i.e., not on campus), level of employment (especially working full time), and being enrolled in non-degree occupational programs” are also ways to define a non-traditional student (p. 3). Students in this course are a part of the University’s distance learning degree program and will therefore take all

their courses within that program online. The online course content was structured by learning modules that cover a fifteen (15) week semester. Each module began on Monday and ended on Sunday by 11:59 PM. Students had a variety of tasks (reading articles, watching videos, completing assignments, responding to classmates, attending live lectures) that they were required to complete by the end of the week. Table 1 shows the topics for each module presented in the online Business Communication course.

Table 1

Modules and Topics covered in Business Communication Course

Weekly Modules	Topics Covered
Module 0	Introduction and Course Overview
Module 1	Personal Branding
Module 2	Business and Social Media Etiquette
Module 3	Creating Good Job Documents
Module 4	Mastering the Interview
Module 5	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the Workplace
Module 6	Concepts of Strategic Communication
Module 7	Application of Strategic Communication I
Module 8	Writing Purposefully for your Audience
Module 9	Application of Strategic Communication II
Module 10	Application of Strategic Communication III
Module 11	Applied Communication Project

The online course differed from the face-to-face course in terms of time, space, interaction, and communication. As the online course instructor, I met with students both synchronously and asynchronously. Synchronously, I met with students via Zoom for a video lecture/discussion. In these sessions, I discussed the topics of the week, clarified assignments, helped with homework, and provided reminders. For all sessions, I had my camera turned on and students had the option to turn their camera on or off. There was a total of six, fifty-minute, live sessions over the fifteen (15) week semester. These sessions were recorded and assigned as a graded component that was outlined in the course syllabus. Students had the option to meet with me for a live lecture or watch the recorded version of the live lecture. Students who watched the recording asynchronously were able to receive their points by entering the participation words expressed throughout the recording.

Asynchronously, students interacted with me through a graded discussion board, email, recorded lectures, and within a GroupMe chat. The discussion board was located within the learning management system (LMS) and the time frame for participation was fixed within the given module week, ending on Sunday by 11:59 PM. There was a total of five (5) graded discussion forums throughout the within the 15-week semester. All the discussion forums allowed for the student to create something (a poster, infographic, 2-minute video, or a newsletter) to be posted within one designated thread. Within these forums, students were required to create an initial post relating to the discussion prompt. I posted the prompt each week and offered written instructions on how students should answer the questions, either written or oral. I also gave guidance on how students should respond to their classmates. I remained active within the discussion on four different days throughout the discussion window. I responded to student's messages and offered additional prompts clarifying or extending the discussion prompt.

Students were required to post and respond to two classmates during the discussion window. They are also encouraged to respond to any questions posted by me or their classmates as a continuation of their initial post.

The recorded lectures were embedded in all but one module (Module 2) and provided clarification on topics and assignments and were located in each module. The video lectures were authored by me and other industry professionals. The industry professionals shared real world experiences related to topics such as interviewing for a job, job document creation, or tips for writing in the workplace. My videos explained homework examples or provided assignment and project guidance. In the lectures, students are able to see and hear me discuss or clarify topics and assignments from the respective module.

Email is used to specifically communicate any important changes or interruptions throughout the course. The email function was located within the LMS and students were advised to email their questions and concerns at any time. My response window was between twenty-four (24) to forty-eight hours (48).

The GroupMe chat was located outside the LMS. The communication platform was downloaded by students within the first week of class via a mobile application to their smartphone or computing device. All students were required to join the GroupMe chat at the beginning of the semester. Students joined the chat via a link I created and posted on the homepage of their Blackboard site. Only students enrolled within the online course had access to the group chat, which is closed and private. Students could interact with their peers and myself at any time within the app. This interaction is not graded or bounded by the learning management system, giving students quick and often immediate access to their peers and myself. Students could also interact with their peers or myself within a separate private direct chat.

Participant Selection and Rationale

The sample for this study was drawn from the online section of GBA 300 - Business Communication that had been completed a semester prior to development of this study. This was intentionally done so that the participants would be freed from the obligation of viewing me as an authority figure and would be able to express their perceptions, experiences, and thoughts without concern for their grade within the course. This sample fits within the scope of this study as I solicited students within a higher education, online learning environment, the educational context in which this study is taking place. I chose this sample purposefully so that the participants selected would have experience as an online student and could effectively discuss, in great detail, those experiences within the course selected. The benefit of purposeful sampling is that I am able to gain information from participants that have a great deal of experience and understanding as a means of providing depth to the purpose of the research (Merriam, 1998). This sample was also selected out of convenience because the participants were previous students of mine within the course under study. They had first-hand knowledge given their time with me over the 15-week course duration and would be best at discussing the communication modes I used and my presence in shaping their online course experiences.

The sample population was sent an email requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The recipients were informed about the details of the study via the informed consent document (See Appendix B) attached to the email message. Since the sample population was not required to participate in the study there was a strong possibility that I would not receive full participation for all thirty (30) students enrolled in the course. Therefore, my minimum sample size was between nine and fifteen participants based on the ‘expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of this study’ (Patton, 1990, p. 186). There is no set number

presented by qualitative methodologists regarding the number of participants a study should have. Sample size, according to Morse (2000), should be a consideration of the scope of study, the design of the study, the nature of the topic, the amount of information participants shared with regard to their experiences, and their experiences in comparison to others. I achieved the minimum sample size, and this provided valuable data in answering my research questions. Nine participants agreed to and consent to participate in this study. These participants were all high achieving students with a letter final grade between an A or B with the course. The participants provided a variety of demographics, experiences, and majors that add greater richness and depth to the study. Table 2 presents information regarding the participants demographic information and pseudonyms assigned:

Table 2

Participant Demographic and Online Course Enrollment

Name of Participants	Number of Online courses taken	Gender Selected	Age Range	Ethnicity Selected
Morgan	3 or more	Female	18-24	White
Michael	3 or more	Male	45-55	White
JLO	3 or more	Female	35-44	White
Nick	3 or more	Male	18-24	White
Rick	3 or more	Male	35-44	White
Marie	5 or more	Female	18-24	Mixed Black/Peruvian
Ashley	3 or more	Female	25-34	White
Alexis	3 or more	Female	18-24	Black/White
John	3 or more	Male	25-34	White

*Names used were chosen by the participants

Data Collection

This study blended the use of in-depth qualitative interviewing with phenomenological methods as the primary source of data collection. By conducting in-depth qualitative interviews, I was able to enter into my participant's perspective deeply to understand and interpret their experiences. This method was appropriate for this study because it created an avenue for more evocative experiences and details as I could ask more how and why questions to my participants as a means of understanding their interactions and experience. Collecting these experiences using interviews allowed me to listen and connect with my participants and their worlds. The experiences of the participants varied, therefore, using interviewing as a data collection method allowed for the discovery and portrayal of multiple perspectives of the case making "interviews the main road to multiple realities" (Stake, 1995, p. 61).

I used a phenomenological approach when interviewing participants because I was able to "generate detailed descriptions of participants' experiences about a phenomenon through asking open questions concerning the participants' feelings, perceptions, and understandings" (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 235). In preparing for the interview, I developed an interview guide with semi-structured interview questions related to the communication modes I used and my presence within the course. Using semi-structured interviews allowed me to create an environment that was open, flexible, and spontaneous for the exploration of the participant's reflections, perceptions, and feelings. The use of this interview structure followed the phenomenological attitude towards interviewing because it allowed for an:

initial reflection is by the person who has undergone a particular experience. It is through thematized verbalization of this reflected experience that I can gain access to the thing

experienced, its modes of appearing in natural attitude, and its meaning (Bevin, 2014, p. 137).

The experiences that the participants shared during the interview formed the basis of understanding the phenomena, the communication modes I used and my presence. This approach was the best way to achieve in depth responses from the participants. Table 3 provided the structure of phenomenological interviewing (Bevin, 2014) I used within this study.

Table 3

A Structure of Phenomenological Interviewing

Phenomenological Attitude	Researcher Approach	Interview Structure	Method
Phenomenological Reduction (Epoché)	Acceptance of Natural Attitude of Participants	Contextualization (Eliciting the Lifeworld in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive/Narrative Context Questions
	Reflexive Critical Dialogue With Self	Apprehending the Phenomenon (Modes of Appearing in Natural Attitude)	Descriptive and Structural Questions of Modes of Appearing
	Active Listening	Clarifying the Phenomenon (Meaning Through Imaginative Variation)	Imaginative Variation: Varying of Structure Questions

Using this structure, I was able to first reflect on my beliefs, knowledge, and attitude with respect to the research topic. This was an important first step as it “aided [me] in articulating prior hypotheses about a topic that may interfere with being able to listen well to others” (Roulston & Choi, 2018, p. 238). I have been both an online student and I am an online instructor. This placed me in the role of an “insider”, and while it is not possible to fully remove my experiences from the research, engaging in this initial reflection (epoche) allowed me to assess my interview questions, be reflective, and more aware of my position and influence during

the interviews. By doing this, I created a space where I could “remain faithful to the descriptions of experiences of the people interviewed, and [accept] that this was how they described their world” (Bevin, 2014, p. 138). This was one step in ensuring a baseline of validity for this study.

Additionally, conducting this type of interview allowed me to develop some initial questions for my audience, but also allowed me the freedom to ask follow-up questions as the interview progressed. My initial questions allowed me to “examine [the participant’s] particular experience, [while considering] the context and biography from which the experience gains meaning” (Bevin, 2014, p.139). It was important that I set the context in which students come to the online environment as a means of framing their experiences before diving deeper into their communication and interaction with me and the communication modes I used. This initial phase of questions focused on a student’s entry into the online learning environment and their experiences within that context. These initial questions created a foundation on which to ask more targeted questions that explored the phenomena in this study. By asking more descriptive and structural questions, I investigated my participants' interpretations to “elicit clarity as these types of questions complement each other and add depth and quality to the information provided” (Bevin, 2014, p.140). Solely as a means of clarifying participants' expressed thoughts, I varied my structure to include questions that clarified the phenomena. This approach was appropriate for this study as each participant had different experiences with the communication modes I used within the course and my presence. Therefore, those experiences must be explored fully. Using imaginative variation as a part of my question structure, I aimed “to make the person identify invariants by describing how the experience would change” (Bevin, 2014, p. 140). This allowed me to focus on their meaning and interpretation of the experience especially in relation to the communication modes I used within the course.

The interviews were roughly 40 - 45 minutes in length. This was a preferred time frame to not overwhelm the participants yet provide them with enough room to share their stories, reflections, and experiences. I was flexible with conversations that exceed that timeframe to give the participants a greater opportunity to express themselves and give further insight and clarification. It was important for participants to feel comfortable and safe within the setting so that they could freely present their thoughts, therefore all interviews were conducted remotely. Participants were located in a space of their choosing using a technological platform that they are already familiar with. Additionally, the participants were all distance learners and would not be readily available for an in-person interview. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, an online meeting software. Students were emailed a personalized Zoom meeting link and asked to turn their video cameras on. With their cameras on, I was able to assess both verbal and non-verbal cues that could also influence the participant's response. All interviews were recorded using both a video recording and computer software system for later transcription and coding.

After each interview, I engaged in a 10-minute reflection to assess my interview questions, biases, topics covered, and feelings. This was done to ensure that I was aware of my position and influence during the interview setting. Engaging in this process allowed me to practice reflexivity. Reflexivity is "the researcher's ability to self-consciously refer to [themselves] in relation to the production of knowledge about research topics" (Roulston, 2010, p. 116). This was an important step in order to better understand myself as I conducted the study by asking and addressing questions related to what I knew, what shaped my perspective, and how I may be imparting my experience to my participants. While reflexivity can take many forms, I chose to engage in reflexivity by jotting down notes. My reflection took the form of a journal and was revisited throughout the data collection and analysis process. I created notes

related to my thoughts and feelings about my interview questions and areas that I wanted to pay attention to before the next interview. The writing down of my thoughts was done as participants made comments during the interview and also after my interviews as a point of reflection and recognition of my positionality within the study. This reflective process allowed me to take into account any biases that may have emerged during the interview. I wanted to ensure that I was documenting my thoughts and feelings of my participants accurately and not inadvertently inserting my thoughts into the narrative or discussion. Reflexivity was a key part of conducting my qualitative study, as I sought to understand how participants make sense of their world, I needed to ensure that I was not either imposing my view or any other oppressive viewpoint on my participants. I needed to ensure that my study was trustworthy, in that it fit with my design and purpose. This would add to the credibility and transferability of my research findings.

The second source of data was collected from the feedback students wrote on the student opinions of instruction (SOI) reports from two previously completed GBA 300 online sections (Summer and Fall 2021) prior to conducting this study. The SOI data was purposely selected due to its function as an evaluation tool. The SOI report was a survey generated by the institution involved with this study for the purpose of instructor assessment and evaluation. This survey was also used by the institution as a measure of assessing institutional effectiveness and as a means of recording how students evaluate courses taken and their level of satisfaction. This source was developed with unbiased intentions and served as an accessible and relevant source of data on how students experienced the course, the communication modes used, and my instruction. Given this context, the SOI served to contextualize the communication modes I used and my presence within the course from students possibly outside the interview participant pool. Therefore, this source of data provided additional insight into how students experienced the course overall and

served as a communicative source for constructing additional versions of the phenomena experienced.

The SOI included both quantitative and qualitative data that anonymously reflected the student's evaluation of the course under study and my instruction. The aspects of the SOI that was used for this study were the open-ended questions at the end of the survey. The open-ended questions were as follows:

- What additional comments do you have regarding the instructor of this course?
- What additional comments do you have regarding this course?

These open-ended questions allowed students to share their thoughts and experiences about aspects of the course that could include the communication modes I used and my presence, two elements that are under exploration in this study. The commentary explained in these questions further illustrated student experiences with or thoughts about my presence and communication modes used within the course. These experiences aided my analysis of the phenomena explored in this study.

My third source of data was collected from the text-based interactions that occurred among students and between students and myself within the GroupMe chat. The GroupMe chat was a required communication mode that all students within the course were a part of. The chat data provided real time interactions among students and between students and me outside the LMS. The use of this text data provided context within the online learning environment where socio-linguistic elements could be analyzed. The text content provided a firsthand dialogue of students' communication, thoughts, expressions and feelings as they occurred within the course. The data collected from the chat focused on how students interacted with each other and me through asking questions, providing feedback, “liking” messages, using emojis or images within

the chat. Both the conversations and individual texts (messages) written by students were used in analyzing my presence and the communication mode itself in shaping student's online course experiences. This was a valuable data source as these interactions occurred within a natural setting and provided documentation relating to the interaction of students and my presence within the online learning environment. Pairing this data with the data from the interviews and SOI's provided a greater understanding of the research environment adding validity (in terms of credibility) to the words of the participants. Additionally, my use of multiple sources of empirical material allowed for greater depth, richness, and rigor through triangulation.

Data Analysis Techniques

The three sources of data were analyzed using thematic analysis that aligned with my epistemological beliefs, methodological choices, and theoretical framework. The use of each data source allows for triangulation as a means of providing corroborating evidence for a more comprehensive understanding of the case.

Interview Data Analysis

After each interview, I downloaded the audio transcript of the interview which was generated by the Zoom software. The interview videos were re-watched in their entirety. I edited all sections of each transcript to ensure that the transcript was an accurate representation of the participant's responses. The editing of the transcripts allowed me to be reflexive and think more deeply about what the participants said and did (non-verbal elements) during the interview in relation to myself and with regard to the questions asked (Shelton & Flint, 2019). Additionally, the editing of the transcripts allowed me to make notes and to hone my interpretative skills for effective data analysis.

The interview transcripts were then analyzed using thematic analysis. The themes constructed for this study were based on the combination of the social presence and teaching presence elements within the Community of Inquiry Model (Garrison et al., 2000). The combination of these elements, according to Richardson et al. (2016), established the formation of the instructor presence concept. The author's stated that instructor presence "is based on more observable instructional behaviors and actions than teaching presence" and that faculty exhibit social presence (persona) through these instructional behaviors and actions. (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 259). The authors defined instructor presence as "how an instructor positions [themselves] socially and pedagogically in an online community" (Richardson et al., 2016, p. 259). This use of the instructor presence concept, as defined by Richardson et al. (2016), allowed me to clearly frame how the communication modes I used and my presence shaped students' experiences within the online course. Only using one of the elements from the Community of Inquiry model limits the range in which the case can be analyzed, and the research questions answered.

Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. [This analytic method] minimally organizes and describes [a researcher's] data set in (rich) detail" (p. 6). The authors outlined a six-step phase to conducting a thematic analysis, four of the six phases will be explained below as they directly related to the process theme generation within this study:

Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with the data

All transcripts were reviewed in their entirety to immerse myself within the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) stated that "it is vital that you immerse yourself in the data to the extent that you are familiar with the depth and breadth of the content" (p. 16). This was done by reading and

re-reading the content of each transcript and incorporating my theoretical framework as I generate interpretations of the data that symbolized and attributed meaning to my participants' words (Saldana, 2021). I highlighted sections of each transcript and included notes and comments related to my participants' experiences which involved the context of the online course, my presence, and the communication modes I used.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

From those highlighted sections, I wrote down initial codes related to aspects of my participants' words that described their experiences and related to the concept of instructor presence. For this process I utilized a priori coding. Using this approach to coding I had a “provisional list of codes determined beforehand to harmonize with [my] study’s conceptual framework [which] enabled an analysis that directly answered [my] research questions and goals” (Saldana, 2021, p. 92). The excerpt below was from a section of an interview with one of my participants (Morgan) that was initially coded:

Participants' feelings about participation in GroupMe interaction: *At the beginning, I was still really hesitant because, like I said, this was the first class where I felt like I could communicate with my peers outside of the discussion boards. Um, but by the end of it, I felt super comfortable and even outside of the individual GroupMe for the group project, there were other students that weren't in that group that would send me a message. We had a couple worksheet problems due out of the [work]book, and a couple people messaged me on there and said, you know, hey can you send me a picture of your [work]book, I don't have mine yet, and it was super comfortable and not weird. Even though we didn't know each other, because it was like you knew them from the class GroupMe that they were obviously in your class but, you kind of had seen their interaction with the professor and in the GroupMe, and so it was a lot more comfortable that way.*

Uncertainty about participating with GroupMe: *At the beginning, I was still really hesitant because, like I said, this was the first class where I felt like I could communicate with my peers outside of the discussion boards.*

Change in attitude regarding interaction in GroupMe: *Um, but by the end of it, I felt super comfortable and even outside of the individual GroupMe for the group project, there were other students that weren't in that group that would send me a message.*

Example of interpersonal connection with other classmates within GroupMe: *We had a couple worksheet problems due out of the [work]book, and a couple people messaged me on there and said, you know, hey can you send me a picture of your [work]book, I don't have mine yet, and it was super comfortable and not weird.*

GroupMe as a medium for interaction and connection: *Even though we didn't know each other, it was like you knew them from the class GroupMe that they were obviously in your class, you kind of had seen their interaction with the professor and in the GroupMe, and so it was a lot more comfortable that way.*

Observed instructor facilitation of interaction: *you kind of had seen their interaction with the professor and in the GroupMe, and so it was a lot more comfortable that way.*

Phase 3: Search for themes

The coded data across all the interviews were grouped so that the patterns in the experiences among participants could be identified and analyzed. I characterized the term “pattern” based on experiences that happened the same way (similarity) and experiences that happened in relation to other activities or events (correspondence) (Saldana, 2021). By identifying patterns, I was able to strengthen my observations into specific occurrences that held meaning for the participants. Based on the patterns observed, I created categories that explicitly described my participants’ experiences with the communication modes I used and my presence. The purpose of this categorization of the coded patterns was to “identify how an array of codes belong in certain groups, to sort codes according to defining attributes, to compare one categorical group to another, and to condense the complexity of the data corpus” (Freeman, 2017, p. 25). These categories were then organized into themes related to my theoretical framework.

I defined a theme as a “phrase or sentence describing more subtle and tacit experiences (Rossman & Rallis, 2003, p. 282). I wanted to focus on the specific experiences, that involved the communication modes I used and my presence, that would yield a better understanding of a

student's online course experience. I used a deductive approach to theme identification based on my theoretical framework, specifically focusing on the instructor presence construct. The themes constructed were analyzed, combined and compared to categories that described the communication modes I used and incorporated aspects of both my social and teaching presence within the online course.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

To ensure thorough analysis of the experiences of the participants, I reviewed the categories and the themes constructed from the grouped codes across all the interviews. I wanted to be diligent that the “data within each theme [had] adequate commonality and coherence, and the data between themes [was] distinct enough to merit separation” (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process of reviewing the themes was done several times until I was sure that all revisions to the codes, categories, and themes constructed were relevant to my research questions and theoretical framework. I then extracted quotes from the interview transcripts that illustrated each theme as means of increasing this study’s believability and trustworthiness.

Analysis of Student Opinions of Instruction (SOI) data

The SOI data was obtained from the research site’s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. This data provided voluntary and anonymous comment from fifteen (15) students who completed the online sections of two former Business Communication courses. SOI data from the Fall and Summer classes were chosen given the close proximal time zone in which the course was taken in relation to this study. Students in both courses experienced the same course design, communication modes, and instructor. The SOI data was downloaded and analyzed using the same analytic steps as the interview data. The analysis focused on two open-ended qualitative questions provided within the survey that asked:

- What additional comments do you have regarding the instructor of this course?
- What additional comments do you have regarding this course?

These open-ended questions allowed students to share their thoughts and experiences about aspects of the course under exploration in this study. The statements provided were coded and categorized based on how students described their experiences with my presence and the communication modes I used within the course. The data was then incorporated into the thematic structure created.

Analysis of the GroupMe Chat

The GroupMe chat focused on the conversations that occurred among students and the individual comments (text) written by students and me within the chat. I approached the analysis of the data by first reading and re-reading the contents of the chat conversation several times. This was done to familiarize myself with the data and identify any interesting or surprising sections. I made notes on aspects of each post and conversational chunks (comments and responses related to a question, topic, or idea) that I found most descriptive of students interacting with each other and myself. I wanted to illustrate aspects of both teaching presence, such as instructor guidance, and social presence, such as emotional expression, displayed within the chat room. By extracting the combination of these two elements of presence, I was able to use my theoretical framework to analyze how this mode of communication and my presence within the chat shaped student's experiences.

When reading the chat as a whole, I made specific comments related to questions asked, responses given and “liked” (a form of acknowledgement) within the chat. This was done to identify specific instances that illustrated the themes constructed. The use of emoticons was noted as a paralinguistic (non-verbal) feature of the conversation and were contextualized in

relation to what was being discussed and/or acknowledged. I developed an explanation of the functions of these features, grounding my explanation by referring to the chat context.

The use of deductive coding allowed me to identify patterns and conversational features that were informed by my research questions and theoretical framework. The transcripts of the chat conversations and comments were incorporated into the themes constructed from the interview data and served as specific examples in support of the findings of this study. I was careful of the assumptions I made about the text data and referred to the context in which the comments and responses were made within the chat. This allowed me to be reflexive and strengthened the claims of my analysis and findings.

One of the main benefits of using the GroupMe chat messages as a data source was that the content could be analyzed within the context of the online space. It could then be copied and pasted directly into the research study, preserving the context in which it was stated. Additionally, the use of visual aspects of the conversation, such as images and emoticons, could be incorporated into the analysis. The analysis of these conversations, comments, and responses within the GroupMe chat allowed me to showcase the interaction among students and between students and myself. This analysis further illustrated the concept of instructor presence through real time communication, generating a powerful understanding of the students' online course experiences, both with me and within the communication mode itself. I was able to support the interview data by applying context, examples, and an interpretation of the students' experiences with my presence within the course utilizing one of the communication modes employed within the course.

Ethical Considerations

Before undertaking this study, I gained permission from the institutional review board (IRB) as my study required the participation of human subjects. This process was an important step to ensuring that my study was conducted with high ethical standards. When conducting this study, there are four ethical considerations that I took into account: efficacy of design, excellent treatment of individuals, plausibility of products, and transparency of process (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). These considerations were important to this study as they ensured this study was carried out ‘correctly’ and afforded minimal to low risk to the well-being and privacy of the participants. Therefore, for this study I adhered to the following ethical guidelines:

- I ensured that the objectives of this study are clearly outlined and aimed to contribute the knowledge of the field of study.
- I reviewed previous research studies to ensure that my study fit within the context of the field and that my methodological choices were rationalized and grounded in the theoretical framework
- I informed all my participants about the nature of the study before asking them to engage in the interview process. I asked that my participants, in their own words, explain what they understood the study would achieve so that I could assess whether the objectives of the study were adequately communicated and understood by the participant.
- I presented each participant with a consent form that explained the nature of this study, the procedures of interviewing, and the recording of their interviews. Participants had the autonomy to decline participation without prejudice.
- I protected the privacy and confidentiality of my participants by storing all video recordings on my personal computer. My personal computer had a password for initial

entry and the data collected was located on a secure server. All names and demographic information provided was changed, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. This allowed the participants to feel comfortable about sharing their experiences.

- I included a positionality statement as a means of situating myself within the study. Situating myself in this role allowed me to become more aware of my position and biases, while keeping myself open to new experiences.
- I provided access to my study to a board audience to support the efficacy of my design

Quality Assurance

For this study, quality was viewed in terms of the relevance to which the study achieved its purpose and reflected the realities of the participants and the field of study. Relevance, as defined by Savin-Baden and Major (2013), “gives emphasis to the importance of the research in context” (p. 471). The theoretical underpinnings of this study followed the constructivist paradigm, where the experiences and realities of the participants were socially constructed. The quality of this study lay in its ability to offer data and analysis of the realities that students had within the online context and setting. This was accomplished through the documentation of my reflexivity. I considered my perspective on what I choose to investigate and how I communicated the results of this study, as my perspective greatly influenced all aspects of this study. Therefore, keeping a journal that documented my thoughts, biases, and feelings as I conduct this research, was paramount to assessing if quality has been accomplished. The content of this journal was not used within this study as a data source but as a means of exercising reflectivity.

Additionally, it was important for me to consider the strategies that I used to ensure quality, such as triangulation. Triangulation allowed for the collection of data from multiple

sources. Therefore, the data collected provided the opportunity for me to broaden my understanding of my presence and the communication modes I used from the perspectives of students within the online learning environment. Additionally, including data that indirectly supported or even contradicted my findings allowed me to think critically about the themes I developed during the data analysis. It allowed me to be more representative of the data by providing a more holistic view of my participant's experiences. This enhanced the credibility of the findings and conclusions presented.

Last, the inclusion of my positionality on the research topic allowed me to situate myself within the research. My positionality statement clarified the influences and viewpoints I held within all aspects of the research process. This ensured that my biases did not heavily influence the findings of this study.

Positionality Statement

I have been an online course instructor for eleven (11) years and have continuously sought and acquired professional development certifications related to online teaching and learning. My entry into teaching within the online environment was out of a need to balance my work-life and personal endeavors, the same balance that many of my students are trying to achieve. Therefore, I believe that I have an understanding of an online student's need to balance their pursuits in order to achieve their intended goals. This perceived understanding informs how I treat online students, as I am more empathetic to their struggles and challenges. Furthermore, I also think my experience shapes my teaching as I ensure that when students take my course, they are satisfied in what they experience. I define the word satisfaction in terms of how they experience their interaction and communication with me within the course. I want both of these elements to be a constant feature of their learning experience. I understand that their time and

outside commitments are just as precious as the time that they are making to be involved and engaged in my online course.

As a new online instructor, eleven years ago, I suffered from the myth that online teaching was easy and required simple maintenance. Therefore, my effort and interaction could be compared to that of a building supervisor; I would be there only when something went wrong. After teaching my first two terms, my evaluations indicated that I was subpar in areas such as feedback, interaction, engagement, and content organization. One comment stuck out to me on my evaluation, this statement said, “this instructor does not understand the online environment and de-values the experiences of students by her lack of participation, communication, and activity.” It is this statement that I continuously return to as I evaluate myself year after year, and up to this point in my online teaching journey. I selected this area of research to understand student’s experiences and perspectives within the online environment and how I, and other online instructors, can add value to that experience through communication and presence.

I have also been connected with the online teaching setting in my role as a graduate student. I have taken several online courses which I found enhanced my understanding of and relationship within the online environment. This role afforded me several benefits as I am able to understand the challenges that online students face, by facing some of those same struggles firsthand. Therefore, in my quest to become an effective online instructor, I try to anticipate student difficulties and mitigate them within my online course. However, this can also be a limitation, as I can easily assume what I think students may want when taking an online class based solely on what I would like to see. This would therefore gear my research towards the elements that I think are important as a current student and instructor. This would distort my role as an unbiased researcher navigating what my participants may need. Given this understanding, I

have to be mindful that I may approach this study thinking that I know all the challenges that online students are facing given my years of experience. In this way I am connected to the research elements and can take comments generated from my interviews personally, since I am also an online course instructor. Therefore, I have to be aware that it is not my role to challenge the thoughts of my participants but to represent their voices as they discuss their experiences. Writing memos after each interview, assessing my ability to be impartial, consciously acknowledging my assumptions and biases, and correcting them will be a key challenge for me in this study. However, it is one that I will actively engage in so that I can assess my thoughts and feelings and re-evaluate my findings.

My theoretical perspective is linked to constructivism in that I see knowledge creation as taking place through social interactions and grounded in activity-based learning. I believe that using the constructivist framework when designing online courses is a key component in fostering interaction and participation, and decreases the challenges faced by online learners. The concept of allowing students control over their learning is grounded in the constructivist realm. However, not always utilized in online courses, which can often be more structured and pragmatic. Hathaway (2013) noted that using the constructivist learning model could facilitate the kinds of interaction and participation needed for a deeper online learning experience. This would allow students within the online environment to form stronger connections with their instructor through the social nature of communication and interaction. However, understanding how instructor communication and presence is utilized and establishes that relationship within the online space can be challenging. My research can therefore provide clarity through the use of this in-depth example and data on establishing such a relationship.

Summary

I conducted a qualitative case study that explored how the communication modes I used and my presence shaped the experiences of students within a single online course. This study was conducted at a large, R1 designated University. The participants selected for this study were non-traditional distance learning students former enrolled within my online business communication course. The data for this study was collected from nine semi-structured interviews, two student opinions of instruction reports, and a GroupMe chat. Using deductive coding the data were analyzed and themes constructed that related to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework. A range of strategies were implemented to ensure ethical and quality standards were maintained so that the findings reflected an accurate, in-depth example of the instructor - student dynamic online and contributed to the improvement of practice and pedagogy within this setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will provide the findings of this qualitative case study that sought to conceptualize the following research questions: RQ 1 How do the communication modes I used shape students' online course experiences? RQ 2 How does my presence shape students' online course experiences? I collected data from three sources: in-depth qualitative interviews with nine students who were previously enrolled in GBA 300, fifteen comments from two student opinions of instruction (SOI) reports for GBA 300, and over two hundred comments from the course's GroupMe chat. The data were analyzed and organized into themes in which the participants described their experiences with the communication modes I used within the online course, and their experiences with my presence with the online course.

To set the stage for the presentation of the participants' experiences, it was important that I set the context in which the participants came to the online environment. This will allow me to frame their prior experiences before diving deeper into their experiences with me and the communication modes I used within the course. I will begin this chapter with a collective overview discussing the participants' expectations and reasons for choosing to take an online course. The chapter will continue with a discussion of each theme, with direct quotations from the participants, and triangulated data from the SOI reports and GroupMe chat to increase the robustness and believability of the findings. I will then provide an interpretation of the findings in relation to the construct of instructor presence as I explore new understandings of the participants' experiences within the course.

Overview

The findings indicated that students taking online courses are both motivated and self-directed when pursuing this mode of education. The nine participants interviewed for this study were all full time, distance students with extensive online course experience. The participants expressed the benefits of convenience, connection, and flexibility when taking a course online that was conducive to balancing their personal lives. Their focus on being successful in the course was driven by the fact that they had other obligations and time constraints. John explained:

I'm married with kids at the house, they're teenagers, so we're busy, so not being in a classroom or being forced to go to a classroom at a specific time is one reason why I am online. The cost is another, the cost to attend a school like this was very favorable compared to many other online schools or even in person schools that were around me in my state.

The consistent discussion of obligations and time commitments highlighted the value of time by the participants and their need to use their time wisely and with intention, given their additional responsibilities outside of school. As they entered the online course, they attached meaning to the use of the various communication modes as well as the time I took to interact with them. These elements shaped their experiences and are evident in how they described their interaction, participation, and learning within the course

For some of the participants, the online environment presented a safe and flexible space for them to learn. As the participants described their experiences with the communication modes and my presence, fulfilling these needs became a priority for the participants and shaped their experiences within the course. The need for comfortability and flexibility expressed by the participants was integral in understanding how they described my presence within the course. Having taken online courses in the past, Ashley felt more confident in continuing to pursue her education online:

I took a few online classes for electives and stuff and I really liked it. Working and doing school allowed me to have flexibility. I could be at school in the evening and I wasn't tied down specifically to a classroom.

Students taking online courses have varying needs, backgrounds, and experiences they bring with them to the online course environment which shape their experiences within that space. Online students expect excellent course content and excellent teaching. They want their experiences to match the expectations they have within the course. The comments expressed by the participants showcased the various reasons they have enrolled in online courses. These comments are not uncommon with current research showing that students, who enroll in online courses, take into consideration flexibility, convenience, cost, and personal life commitments when making their choice. Therefore, presenting this context was a foundational step in understanding their reactions, comments, and experiences with both the communication modes I used within the online course and my presence within the online course.

Communication Modes

Communication modes are defined as the synchronous and asynchronous communication tools I used to facilitate instruction, establish presence, create dialogue, and generally communicate with students, both within and outside the learning management system (LMS) (Kozark & Lum, 2015; see also Madden et al., 2017). These include:

- Email
- Synchronous video lectures
- Discussion boards
- GroupMe chat
- Asynchronous video lectures

The communication modes used within the course was an important climate setting factor in creating an optimal online educational experience for the participants. The findings indicated students had a positive course experience due to the variety and consistency of the communication modes used within the course. Not all the communication modes used within the course shaped students' experiences in the same way. Each communication mode shaped students' learning, participation, and interaction within the course based on how it was used (to ask questions, to gain feedback, to collaborate) and when it was used (to complete homework, answer a discussion board question, or clarify instructions). This meant that no single communication mode created an optimal course experience. However, when various communication modes were used within the course, they were paramount in fulfilling the various needs of students within the online course, leading to greater opportunities for interaction, learning, and participation within the course. Additionally, the findings indicated that when used consistently, the communication modes created an environment where the participants felt motivated to ask questions and encouraged to persist and participate within and throughout the duration of the course. Based on the findings of the study, I will discuss how the various and consistent communication modes I used within the course created a climate for interaction, self-expression, learning, and participation among students and between students and myself.

Communication Modes Promote Student Interaction

The findings indicated that the communication modes I used within the course created a climate for interaction among the participants and between the participants and myself. Through this interaction, the participants were able to socialize and collaborate with their peers and myself, expanding their learning on course topics. Being able to meet with their peers and myself in multiple settings (discussion board, synchronous video lectures, and GroupMe chat) facilitated

the frequency and consistency of their interaction. Nick, in describing his interaction within the discussion board and GroupMe chat, stated that he was able to, “talk with everyone and see what everyone's thoughts are on things, you see how people approach things. You have to give your thoughts about everyone's thoughts, and you get everyone’s feedback and I really appreciated that.” This ability to socialize with their peers using the various communication modes encouraged student participation within the course.

The communication modes expanded student learning and understanding of course content due to their interactive functionality. In the discussion board, the participants were able to share their experiences as well as learn from the experiences of their peers as they engaged with the course content. This interaction with multiple viewpoints provided the participants with the opportunity to gain and share feedback within the course. Ricky explained, “you can see where you rack and stack amongst your peers and then you can see, in the discussion banter, back and forth, where your thoughts line up with other people.” In the synchronous video lectures, students were able to interact with their peers, removing the mystery of who their classmates were. The ability to see and hear their peers that they previously interacted with in the discussion board created a sense of familiarity and connection within the course. Ricky stated that:

Any time you can talk to somebody face to face or just be the recipient of information face to face, it makes the communication clearer. because humans communicate more through facial expressions than they do with actual words. You can write whatever you want, on a piece of paper, you can “lol”, “jk”, and whatever else, but nobody can see the expression. So that's something that was really nice to have, just different.

The communication modes also shaped student interaction by allowing for collaboration. The participants were able to meet together and discuss course topics and their experiences which allowed them to get to know each other and build relationships with their classmates. The

GroupMe chat allowed Morgan to connect with her peers and manage the team project assignment collaboratively. Having these communication modes as a source of connection reduced her anxiety around the assignment. Morgan stated:

When we did our group assignment, I was super overwhelmed by that because several of us lived in different time zones, and how in the world are we going to combat this. We were able to utilize the GroupMe chat so that we could all connect. We're able to communicate, build our group, get to know each other, a little bit. It just seemed more feasible.

The positive experiences described by the participants highlighted the value of having multiple communication modes within the course as an important factor in supporting student interaction within the course. These experiences also indicated the desire for students to be social within the online setting. Therefore, creating an online course environment where students can both share and receive knowledge, as well as interact, was paramount in promoting both student satisfaction and participation within an online course.

Communication Modes Create Consistent Dialogue

The communication modes, when utilized consistently, provided an avenue of constant dialogue within and throughout the duration of the course. This allowed for a greater sense of comfortability and familiarity within the course where the participants could be constantly involved, reducing their feelings of isolation. Ashley explained, “there was always open communication and never silence when I took the class.” Her use of the word “silence” was very striking to me, given the fact that online students can often move through an online course in constant states of silence, resorting to their own solo thoughts. Through the use of the communication modes, the findings indicated that the participants had the ability to connect with their peers and myself consistently through greater opportunities for dialogue.

Additionally, by having more opportunities for dialogue, the participants were able to create opportunities for community building and friendships which made their course experience more satisfactory. The findings indicated that the participants often struggled with forming relationships within the online course. Morgan, like most of the participants, shared that:

In distance school it's really hard to meet friends so I'm actually a senior now and, until this course I hadn't had any interaction with other students, besides, just you know, the discussion posts. It's just hard to me, you don't see faces, so it's hard to communicate well with other peers and so almost right from the start, I was able to interact with the other students in this class, so we were able to kind of bounce questions off of each other and kind of learn together.

However, by incorporating multiple avenues of dialogue the participants were able to connect with familiar faces, hear, and see familiar voices throughout their duration within the course. Morgan explained that she is now friends with the classmates that she interacted with in the course, “the three of us that connected, are going to meet in Marietta over Spring Break and we're gonna have a girls night and that’s from that GroupMe.” Marie also made a friend within the course through the use of the GroupMe chat: “there was one girl in the GroupMe that I was able to get really close with and I feel like that (GroupMe chat) helped to make this open so [I could] network within class.” This was an interesting finding in that it highlighted the use of communication modes outside the LMS as a source for reducing the challenge of isolation facing students within online courses. Having the option to engage in meaningful dialogue within the course, the participants could also connect with their peers in supporting relationships.

GroupMe Chat - An Opportunity for Self-Expression and Collaboration

The communication modes I used within the course create a multimodal approach to promoting student interaction and creating consistent dialogue. In addition to their collective benefits, the findings indicated that each tool provided the participants with individual value that further informed their experiences within the course. Communication modes, such as the

GroupMe chat, created an informal opportunity for self-expression and collaboration among students and between students and me, outside the LMS. This informal environment allowed students to express themselves aloud in a variety of ways, using emoticons, “likes” and GIFs as a means of sharing their thoughts and feelings within the course. Using this communication mode, the participants were able to engage in both “on topic” and “off topic” conversations. Paulus (2006) explained that on-topic conversations were geared towards the learning concepts and obtaining feedback, while “off-topic” conversations were related to emotional or technical support. Both kinds of conversations allowed the participants to express themselves in a variety of ways and feel supported from both myself and their peers, leading to greater participation. Nick, an active and connected GroupMe user, stated that:

GroupMe definitely made me participate more because I was just talking directly to you and the whole class. If I would ask a question, another student could also answer it for me, so that's a huge benefit in that we can all work with each other, at the same time.

The following excerpts show “on topic” conversations between students and I within the GroupMe chat. Figures 3, 3.1, and 3.2 illustrated the informal nature of this communication mode in not only supporting student collaboration but giving students the opportunity to share their thoughts in a manner in which they could find support from me and from their peers.

Figure 3

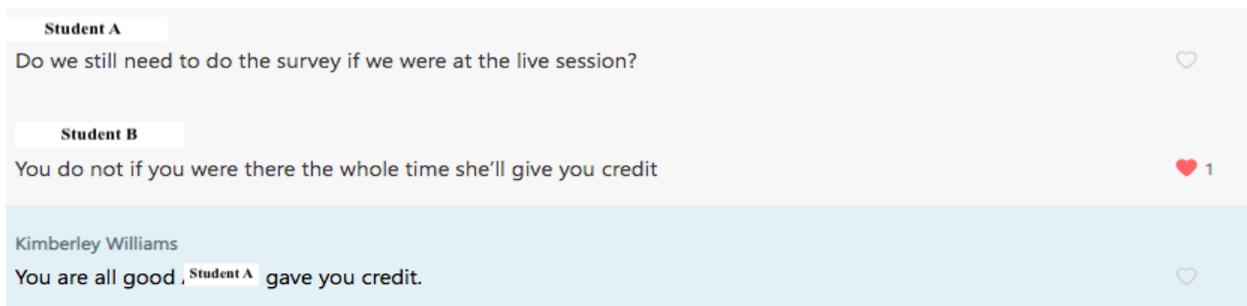


Figure 3.1

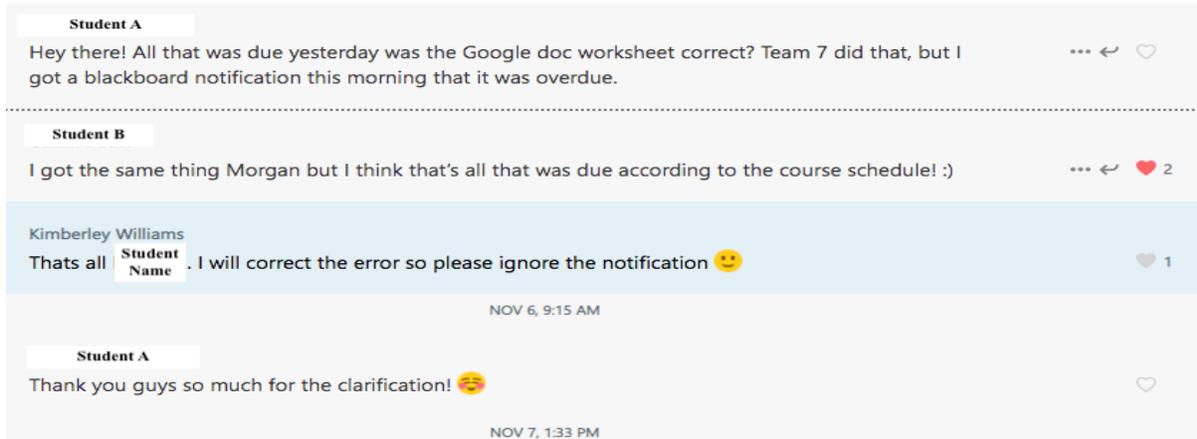
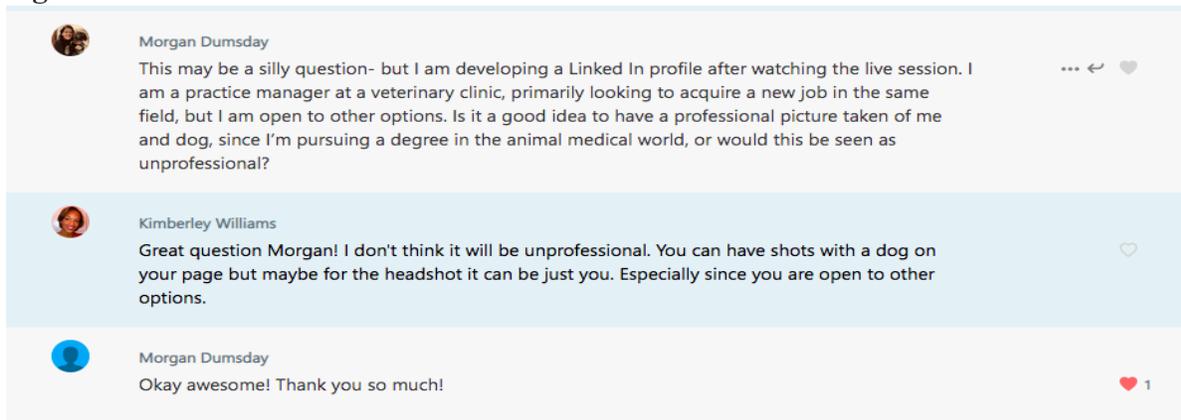


Figure 3.2



Using this communication mode, learning and collaboration can be extended beyond the LMS giving students a constant connection to the course and their classmates. This was an important finding in reducing the transactional gap faced by students within the online learning environment.

The following excerpts show conversations between students and me within the course GroupMe showcasing an “off-topic” conversation. The figures 4 and 4.1 illustrated the use of this communication mode as an avenue for students to share more of their personal selves within the course which intrinsically motivated them to persist within the online course.

Figure 4

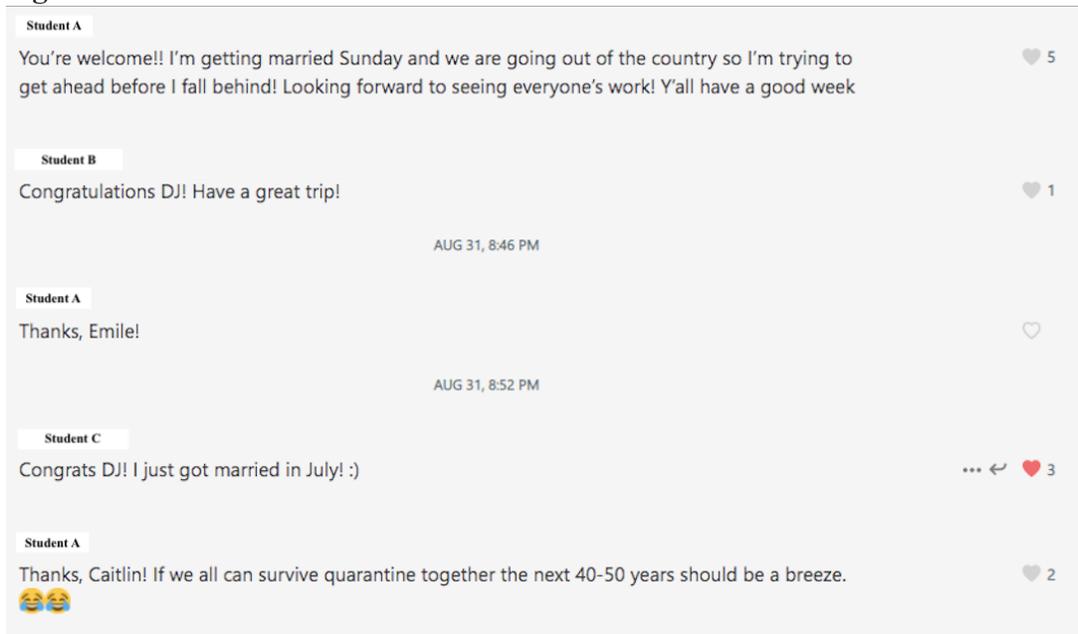
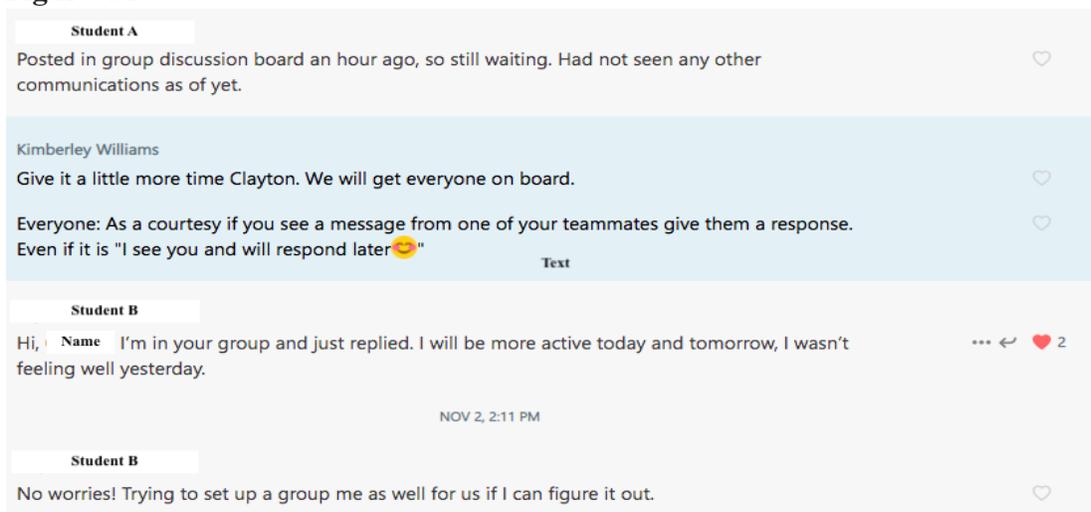


Figure 4.1



Being able to express themselves freely and engage in various conversations created opportunities for interpersonal connection among students. Using this communication mode, these interpersonal connections also facilitated a greater understanding of course assignments through the sharing of experiences and ways of thinking. Alexis explained that:

Using GroupMe gave me an understanding of what other people were doing. Seeing their experiences helps me better understand the assignment, because at first, I was kind of confused on what I needed to do. But everyone kind of collaborated saying 'hey, like this

is kinda what I did', it made it a lot easier to understand the assignment and just get it done.

Furthermore, the use of this communication mode created an opportunity for instructor immediacy through feedback and dialogue. The GroupMe chat reduced the authoritative gap between students and me by creating direct and quick access for collaboration. The use of the communication mode reduced my role from a "sage on the stage" to more of a mentor-mentee relationship between students and myself. Nick explained that the GroupMe chat gave him a comfortable space to asking any question and not:

Feel like it was a dumb question or feel like I had to speak all professional, dear professor, kind thing. It was just real and personable, and I felt like I actually could talk to you about things. You would wish us happy holidays and ask us about our day. I felt comfortable communicating with you and everyone. You turned it (GroupMe) into a little community.

By creating this informal environment, the participants were more inclined to share personal and professional thoughts with me either via a direct message or within the class chat

While the GroupMe created an avenue for self-expression and collaboration, this experience was predicated on my consistency within the chat. The findings indicated a cautionary approach to the inclusion of a GroupMe chat within the course by some participants given their experiences with cheating, poor language, and lack of interaction in chats prior to this course. Alexis explained that "it's always a tricky situation where you're debating whether you even want to be in a GroupMe, just because you don't want to ever be in trouble or anything." However, my modeling of the behavior, communication, and level of formality expected within the GroupMe chat was necessary for the success of this communication mode. Setting the kind of climate where the participants felt confident to share, respond, and interact was my initial and consistent duty throughout the duration of the course. Despite the initial reservations by some participants within the forum, all but one participant engaged actively (responding using text

and/or emoticons) or passively (liking and reading messages) within the chat. These findings were critical in understanding the need for my consistent presence and climate setting in the GroupMe chat.

Synchronous Video Lectures - Being Face to Face Online

The synchronous video lectures re-created the face-to-face classroom setting promoting greater opportunities for instructor immediacy online. The findings indicated an untapped need for immediacy and the inclusion of a more humanized course environment. The verbal and non-verbal immediacy behavior expressed within the synchronous video lectures complemented the use of the solely digitized elements within the course. This fusion allowed for full circle moments of deeper interaction and connection between students and me. JLO explained that the human interaction she felt with me in the online course was the closest she could get to any form of collaboration or instructor connection:

The fact that we had to do the zoom in real time, put you in a human versus digital form. When you're just reading the document that a teacher has sent you versus having a person that like I said, you do your own videos. When I talk to you, I picture your face, if I'm messaging, you are somebody. I feel connected to your world.

JLO's comments were striking in that she recognized me as a person which intrinsically motivated her high level of participation within the course. Like JLO, Alexis explained:

I would get off early to watch. It was very easy to just kind of get a better understanding and just kind of get those questions answered rather than waiting till late in the night. I also felt heard, you always tried to make sure we were all participating and talking and answered any questions we all had. I felt like I got to know you pretty well, which is weird to say. There's so many of my online classes where if the Professor was standing right in front of me, I probably wouldn't even realize them.

Both JLO and Alexis' comments were interesting in that both participants realized something that they never knew they needed online, human interaction. The findings indicated that the use of real time dialogue with me and their classmates in the synchronous video lectures created

moments of empathy, connection, and learning. Similar to a face-to-face classroom, both students and I could hold a conversation and get to know each other in a dual setting of both formal instruction and informal conversation. Using this communication mode, the participants were able to “talk face to face” (Ricky), to see “real people who were your peers” (Marie and John), to “place a face with a name” (Michael) and these experiences created a classroom community.

Discussion Board - A Mixture of Experiences

Communication modes such as the discussion board must be used with intention by the instructor in order to create an avenue for peer feedback and student creativity. This intentionally regulated the attitude with which students approached the discussion board and the value they gained from using it. This was an important finding given the opposing viewpoints expressed by the participants about the use of the discussion board within the course. Some viewpoints relegated the discussion board to nothing more than a flippant activity based on prior experiences, “I honestly couldn't tell you if the discussion was due on Friday or on Sunday and I wouldn't be able to tell you, whose response I responded to. I hardly remembered what I read” (Morgan). While others expressed their pleasure for engaging in the forum conversation:

“the discussion board helped me think and look at other people in a different way. In a discussion post where I have literally nothing else to say, I would read other people's posts and kind of know how to respond and try to go in the direction than they went in (Marie)

Despite these opposing viewpoints none of the participants wanted to remove the discussion board as a communication tool. This consensus of it remaining as a part of the participants' online course experience could be based on their familiarity with the communication mode, “we have discussions and discussion boards in every class” (Morgan). However, the findings indicated a need for differentiation and choice in the discussion board, as a much-needed revamp

from the traditional “read it then write it” format. Michael expressed the satisfaction for being able to display this understanding of the course content graphically, which was something new and beyond the scope of what he thought he could do:

I liked how your assignments were totally different. We had to do some things in terms of graphic generation, those kinds of things I have never done before, so that was kind of cool. Some of the software packages out there I never used before right. I am pretty much a Word document, Excel, Outlook kind of guy, not a lot of involvement in the graphic design, so that was cool to see what was out there right and it kind of removed the mystery of how some people publish this beautiful stuff.

While Marie shared, that being able to create something original elevated her learning and what she posted:

“the way in which you did it (created assignments that allowed for choice and self-expression) allowed me to think about the discussion posts in another way, that is unique to myself, and not mimicking what other students had to say.”

Both Michael and Marie’s comments highlighted that the use of the discussion board in this course promoted student creativity and created a constructivist learning environment. In this environment, students could share their experiences, incorporate the course content, and learn from the experiences of their peers. The findings indicated that the participants valued being able to present their thoughts within the discussion board, both graphically and/or via a short video. This format encouraged quick reading and most importantly, responses by both peers and me. While the stimulation of creativity was a part of the allure of the discussion board, the findings indicated that central to the positive experiences of the participants was my feedback and presence within the discussion forums, an uncommon occurrence for all the participants prior to this course. Michael explained:

You were engaged with the class and your responses within the discussion boards were unique. I think you're the only Professor that I've seen that has done that, the others have the discussion board expectations and assignments and I've never seen one professor post to a discussion board, and I am in my last two classes before graduation.

This continuous level of instructor immediacy made the participants value the discussion board more as they knew that their posts were being evaluated and acknowledged within the forum rather than at the end of the week with a generic “well done” response. JLO explained:

I like the fact that you responded on the discussion board, whereas my other teacher would send an email, it wasn't open for others to see. I like it to be with the information that is being critiqued all in one space, and I looked at other people's critiques for the things that you would post as errors [to see if I was on the right track]. I'm just an instant feedback person.

These findings highlighted the need to revise what is discussed within the discussion board and how that discussion takes place. Given the commonality of the discussion board as a communication mode in the participants' experience and its presence within this study, a greater focus on instructor design, feedback, and presence was needed to avoid the “checking of a box” feeling among students.

Asynchronous Video Lectures - Facilitating Student Learning

The asynchronous video lectures improved the participants' understanding of course concepts by providing opportunities for deeper learning. The recorded videos could be paused and restarted, slowing down the explanation of the topics to the pace and focus of the participants. John described the recorded video lectures as one of the main ways for, “working with me and being a part of a class,” even though he was online:

I don't really have the attention span; you know to just diligently read through 50 pages of material. I was not super good about staying focused on the material and learning through texts on a page. So, the [recorded] video lectures would expand the concepts and help me if I was struggling within something in particular.

The ability to see more detailed examples at multiple times throughout the course allowed the participants to use the video lectures when completing their assignments. This consistency created a quasi-face to face classroom experience where the participants could have one on one time with me as I explained course concepts.

The asynchronous video lectures also created another source of feedback that complemented the written instructions and written comments expressed within the course.

Ashley explained that:

I would watch them and sometimes take notes on them and just look at how I can implement those types of skills. I felt like it was built up to being able to successfully use all those concepts. I thought those videos are really great to provide just that little extra cushion of information to help reiterate or share some new ideas to help put into my projects and assignments.

The breakdown of course concepts, homework explanations, and review of tests and assignments created a layered approach that cemented and improved what the participants were learning each week. Additionally, the use of multiple asynchronous video lectures throughout the course supported a strong student-instructor relationship. Having instructor-authored videos throughout the course provided constant direction, reinforcing the participants' ability to receive a good grade on their assignments. Michael expressed his frustration in other classes that used recycled or old videos recording with different professors or sometimes, no professor at all:

I've had other classes, where there are some voice overs or even some pre-recorded video sessions going through instruction and it's not my instructor. Being a business guy that frustrates me some because I'm thinking why am I paying this for this class when this was probably recorded three or four years ago, maybe by somebody else. I liked how you broke down the examples during the course. I knew it was you and those videos really helped to solidify my understanding of the concept.

Being able to see and hear me explain aspects of the course brought about a sense of confidence and trust among the participants when they completed their assignments. The participants could rely on my direction in the video and saw that direction translated in course success.

Email - A Forgotten Mode

The findings indicated that the interactive nature of the synchronous video lectures, discussion board, and GroupMe chat, overshadowed the need to use email as a communication mode within the course. These modes provided the opportunity for participants to gain instant

feedback and created an environment that supported open and consistent communication. Nick described that he was already inundated with emails from the institution regarding school, events, and internships, so his inbox is “becoming spam” and therefore resorted to the GroupMe chat as his main mode of communication:

It's (the GroupMe chat) all class discussion, everything is relevant, if I see the notification, I know I should check it out as opposed to email, it might just be very generic. It might just be trying to get me to sign up for something, it's just random. But the GroupMe is where everyone interacting, everyone talking.

The social connection provided by communication modes such as the GroupMe chat allowed me to actively communicate alongside all the students within the course. The findings indicated that the participants were already familiar with this form of social, interactive communication within their personal lives. Morgan stated:

Outlook is really confusing and hard to read. So, I honestly have a hard time, so I just delete them (emails from Blackboard) because it's kind of pointless to look at them because I'm like, what class are you even talking about and the codes are kind of weird. Whereas in the GroupMe it was just like a text, almost like a text reminder.

Therefore, my use of these communication modes served as an extension of the familiar with the added benefit of immediate responses, reducing their reliance on email communication within the course.

Instructor Presence

Instructor presence is defined as how an instructor socially and pedagogically interacts with students (Richardson et al., 2016). The findings indicated that my presence was displayed through self-disclosure of personal and professional aspects of my life, in the quality and quantity of feedback I provided, and how I showed I cared about the participants and the course content. These aspects of my personality and demeanor were the social and pedagogical

indicators that shaped the participants' motivation, participation, learning, and satisfaction within the course.

The findings also indicated that my presence elicited feelings of mattering (Schlossberg, 1989; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) among the participants. While not all the dimensions of mattering were expressed by the participants within this study, the participants described that my presence made them feel valued, appreciated, and important within the course, giving them more confidence in completing their assignments and expressing themselves. My presence was supported by the communication modes used within and outside the LMS. By initiating, following up, and being a consistent face in all the communication modes used within the course, my presence bridged the temporal and authoritative distance between student and me. This bridge created a more social online course environment that supported student interaction, learning, and participation.

Self-Disclosure as Presence

Sharing stories about my personal and professional life was an indicator of my presence that humanized the course environment and allowed the participants to in turn share personal and professional aspects of themselves. This form of self-disclosure allowed the participants to feel more comfortable in the course and shaped their view of my presence as “real” or “human”. The findings indicated that the participants enjoyed hearing stories about my family, my interests, and my various professional ideas. Marie expressed that:

I felt like you were very open with us, I mean, you even shared with us that you had a child, and so that kind of made you more real. You aren't just this professor, you are now a mom, a young mom with a child.

Seeing me in a more human form created an environment for open communication and supported the building of relationships between students and myself.

The findings also indicated that self -disclosure, as an indicator of my presence, supported instructor immediacy. The majority of the participants valued the perceived closeness between themselves and I. The knowledge that their instructor was much more than just a “talking head” on a screen allowed them to be more invested in the course. Being able to form a connection with me online created an avenue for greater student-instructor collaboration, leaving the participants more satisfied with their course experience.

My presence within the communication modes allowed me to express aspects of my personality that elicited feelings of mattering among the participants. Several participants expressed their appreciation for being acknowledged, (the attention dimension of mattering), through my direct communication via the discussion board, in synchronous video lectures, or within the GroupMe chat. Rick enjoyed that I supported the discussion of topics that were more personal during the synchronous video lectures:

You weren't necessarily strict to the agenda. We can go down rabbit holes in certain areas, we had times where we could open up a can of worms and see what other people have to say. You could say what you needed to say.

In the GroupMe chat my presence created a more informal environment through humor and fun. The following figures illustrated my use of memes in the GroupMe chat as a means of sharing my fun and humorous personality within the course.

Figure 5

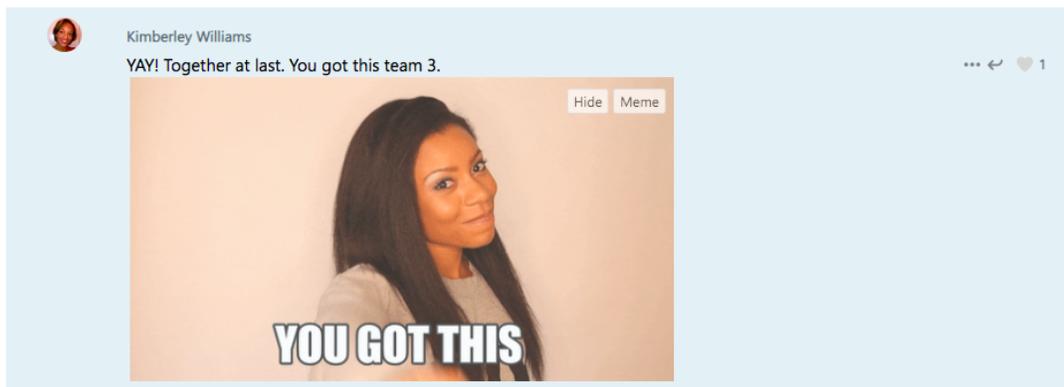
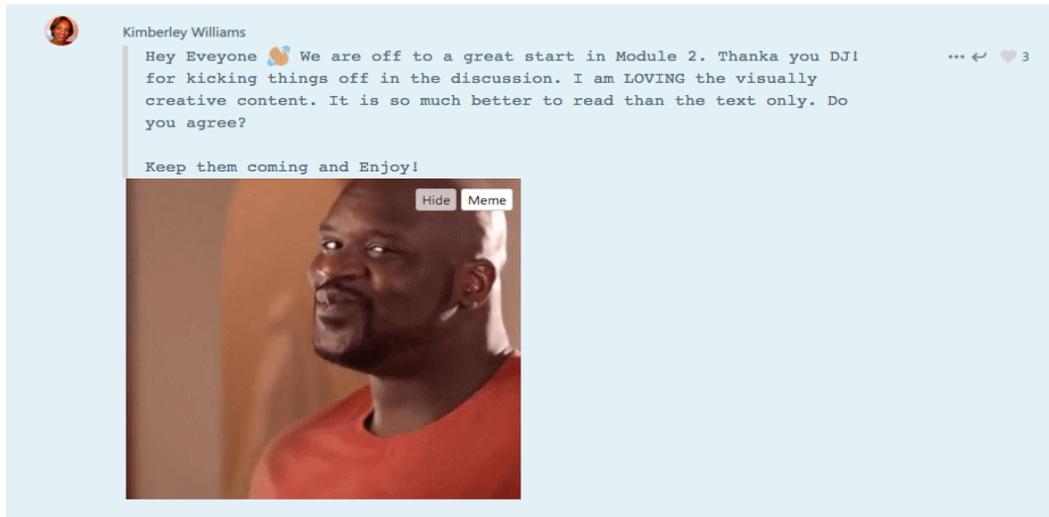


Figure 5.1



The findings indicated that the participants valued my self-disclose and the opportunity for greater dialogue between themselves and I. Engaging in self-disclosure further humanized modeling the level of interaction that participants described aided in their participation and satisfaction within the course.

Care as Presence

Showing that I was interested and invested in the success of the participants was a feature of my presence that supported their participation and satisfaction within the course. The findings indicated that the participants valued my willingness to help them with their assignments as a display of my care and compassion towards them during the course. Rick expressed:

You're not just jumping on the computer in the evening and grading stuff and saying here's the book, get it done. Although I don't mind that, when somebody takes an interest in what I'm doing more, that is critical for me to say I'm going to do a better job.

This need to “do a better job” was an important comment by Rick that showcased the role of instructor presence in supporting a student's persistence within the course. By encouraging the participants, they could do well in the course, I viewed them as important (a dimension of mattering) and thus I was able to build trust and group cohesion between the participants and

myself. Ashley stated that, “you were always hyping us up and that made me feel comfortable, I felt it was intentional.” The perception of my intentional care created a more social course environment that reduced the authoritative gap between students and myself. Marie explained that talking to professors could be daunting, however “you were reachable, it was not scary to come to you because you made us feel warm.” Marie’s comment about feeling “warm” alludes to aspects of my personality and demeanor that other participants mentioned as well. The findings indicated that my upbeat attitude and personality was yet another way that participants felt I displayed my care for them within the course. My level of likability was tied to my personality and demeanor and shaped the participants' interaction with me. Alexis stated that:

I think that just your enthusiasm during the zoom calls is one big way that made me want to participate in the course. I feel like just how often we were either seeing or interacting with you, even if we weren't having a zoom call, there was always something in the GroupMe, we were constantly engaged even if it wasn't physically seeing you in person, it made it kind of hard to be isolated.

Additionally, the findings highlighted my presence in the various communication modes as avenues that displayed my encouragement, personality, and willingness to help throughout the course. The figures below illustrated my use of the GroupMe chat in showing care as a feature of my presence.

Figure 5.2

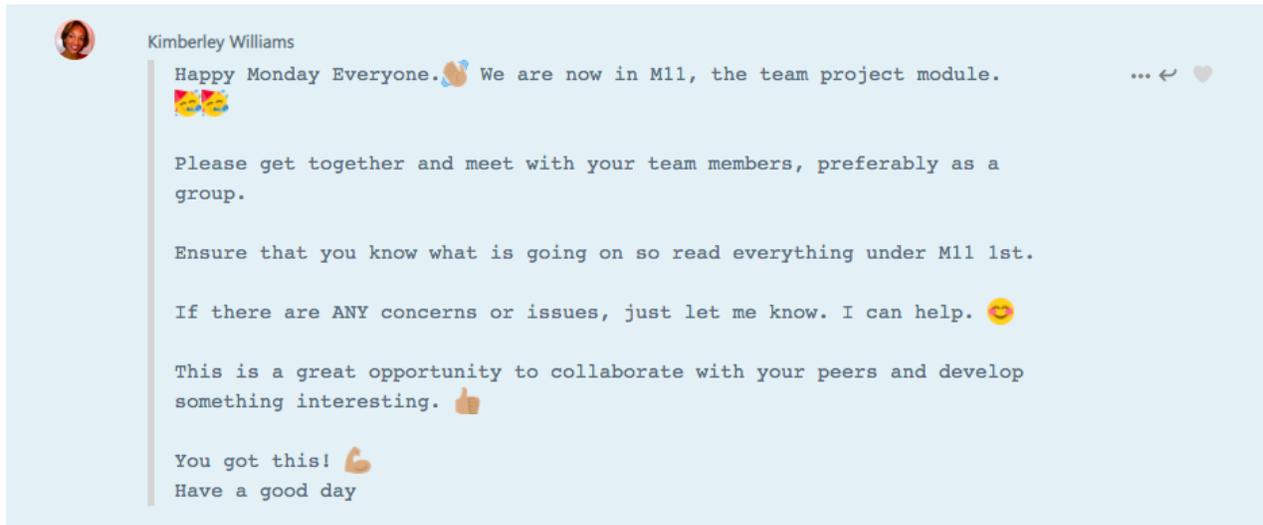
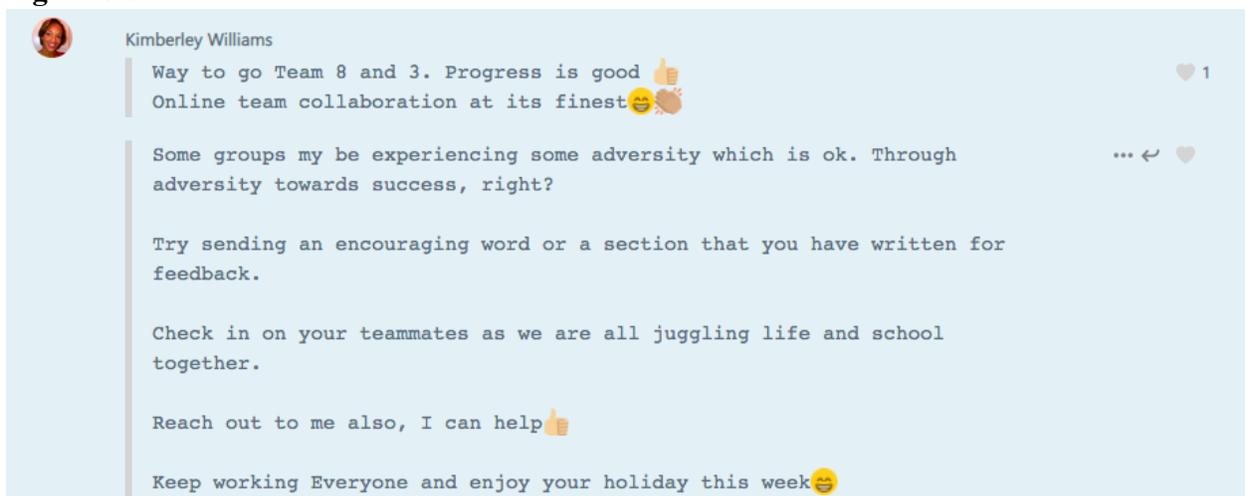


Figure 5.3



Creating a course environment where the participants felt cared for and important supported their learning was a key factor in their participation in the course. The findings suggest that the participants wanted to experience my presence in this way as it elevated their satisfaction and motivation within the course.

Feedback as Presence

Providing consistent feedback within the course was a feature of my presence that facilitated the participants' learning and direction within the course. The participants valued the

various ways in which they could receive comments and explanations on their assignments. It is this variety and consistency of feedback and communication that aided in the participants' course success. Marie expressed that:

You were reachable. If I chose to GroupMe today or email tomorrow and then live discussion the next day, I feel like all of those ways, you were very timely in your response.

The findings indicated that the participants valued feedback that reinforced my expectations and supported their course success. This display of presence allowed the participants to feel confident in completing their assignments by limiting moments of uncertainty or questioning. JLO expressed that:

Just the constant answering of all the questions on the GroupMe served the same purpose as being part of that video. When other people are asking questions that you didn't even think to ask and you responding to all of those, where all of us can see that, made me understand the content better.

By gaining a better understanding of the course content, my feedback reduced the participant's frustration when completing assignments. This finding intersected with care as a feature of my presence. The participants felt supported in their learning in that I also wanted to see them succeed in the course. Rick explained:

You took the extra 10 seconds to type a full sentence that said, this is what you did good or, this is what you did bad, and this is what you can work on. With you, I could have got 100 out of it and there would have been some constructive criticism, whether to continue writing in that fashion or whether I need to adjust my styles, or where I can focus on the future. The amount of feedback we got, and the quality of the feedback was above anything I had experienced.

Rick's comment about the quality of the feedback he received within the course was an important point to note as to the level of attention and direction that the participants appreciated within the online setting. Since the participants are not able to ask questions directly as they

would in a face-to-face class, having consistent and detailed feedback further supported their satisfaction within the course.

The findings indicated that the participants wanted to achieve excellent grades within the course and therefore valued more opportunities for dialogue and direction from me, as the perceived gatekeeper to their grades. My provision of consistent feedback as an aspect of my presence motivated students extrinsically and created an environment in which they felt supported in their understanding and completion of the course content.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings gained from three data sources: in-depth qualitative interviews with nine former students of GBA 300, fifteen comments from two student opinions of instructions (SOI) reports, and over two hundred comments from the course's GroupMe chat. The findings indicated that the use of the communication modes allowed for interaction and collaboration among the participants and between the participants and me. The participants were able to work together with their peers, connect with me, and ask follow up questions that clarified their understanding of the course concepts. The various communication modes also afforded students the opportunity to engage in dialogue that re-created the face-to-face classroom setting despite their geographical distance. This created a social course environment that facilitated relationship building, allowed the participants to feel "heard", and showcased their thoughts, ideas, and creativity within the course.

The findings also indicated that my personality, demeanor, expression of self, and showcasing of care towards the participants, were features of my presence that supported student motivation, learning, participation and satisfaction within the course. The use of the communication modes allowed for the display of these features of my presence in a consistent

and varied manner that elicited feelings of mattering and humanized the online course environment. In Chapter 5, I will discuss these findings as they relate to previous research on instructor communication and instructor presence online. I will also further analyze the themes through the lens of my theoretical framework, the Community of Inquiry model, which will allow for recommendations towards practice and further research.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERPRETATION, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this case study was to contextualize how the communication modes I used, and my presence shape the experiences of students within a single online course. I collected data from three sources: in-depth qualitative interviews with nine former students of GBA 300, fifteen comments from two student opinions of instructions (SOI) reports, and over two hundred comments from the course's GroupMe chat. The findings of this study can inform the pedagogical practices of instructors teaching online by providing an in-depth example of how instructor presence and the various communication modes, utilized within a single online course, promote student interaction, learning, and participation.

This chapter includes a discussion of the major findings of this case study in relation to the extant literature and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework in order to interpret the experiences of students, substantiate my arguments, and provide recommendations for future research. For the scope of this study, the construct of instructor presence was applied to the findings of the study as it connects both teaching and social presence constructs within the CoI framework. Last, this chapter will address implications for practice to inform the practice of professionals and students within the field of online education.

RQ 1: How do the communication modes I used shape students' online course experience?

Collectively, the communication modes I used positively shaped students' online course experience by providing greater opportunities for interaction and dialogue. The use of various communication modes created multifaceted opportunities for dialogue among students and

between students and me. Having multiple ways that students could interact within the online course reduced their temporal and geographic separation (Moore, 1993) and connected them to a world outside of their isolated space. Reducing student isolation within the online environment created greater opportunities for participation and interpersonal connection among students and between students and their instructor. However, this benefit must be created by the instructor, as they set the climate for the course, and facilitated through an instructor's use of communication modes that offer interactive dialogic exchanges. Garrison et al. (2000) positioned climate setting at the intersection of the teaching and social presence elements within the CoI framework. This intersection highlighted the social and pedagogical interactions (instructor presence) that are needed to create an optimal learning experience. As an instructor designs and teaches their course, they should use communication modes to create both formal and informal spaces within and outside the LMS that allow students to feel socially connected and build group cohesion. Within this study, the inclusion of communication modes such as synchronous video lectures, discussion boards, and mobile instant message tools such as GroupMe, offered meaningful face to face connections, conversations, and instant feedback. By using these communication modes in a consistent manner, instructors can establish rapport and create a sense of community within their online course (Trespacios and Uribe-Florez, 2019). Given the challenges that students face with isolation and lack of interpersonal connection (Kebritchi et. al., 2017), an instructor's use of interactive communication modes provides a potential solution to these challenges. Therefore, further research should focus on the balance between text and video/audio communication modes as means of identifying the preferred balance that must be implemented within the design of an online course.

Individually, each communication mode positively shaped students' online course experience based on how it was used (to complete homework, gain feedback, or interact within the course) and allowed for student learning, participation, and satisfaction within the course. The GroupMe chat provided students with an informal interactive space that allowed for self-expression and collaboration, stimulating additional opportunities for students to participate with the course. Like isolation, participation was another challenge for students within an online course. The findings of this study indicated that my use of the GroupMe chat created a space for student participation that supported their learning and performance within the course. The literature recognizes the link between participation and learner performance as well as the need for high quality interaction (Alavi & Dufner, 2005; Fredericksen et al., 2002; Rovai, 2002). The informal nature of the GroupMe built trust and community among students and between students and me, motivating learner performance and interaction. Instructors should consider the use of mobile instant message tools such as GroupMe as an important climate setting feature in creating greater opportunities for student participation outside the LMS. Having this communication mode outside the LMS supports the natural formation of a social community that students are already familiar with and engaged in their personal life. Given this benefit, further research into the use of mobile instant messaging tools (MIM) such as GroupMe for educational use is warranted. The research should focus on MIM tools that form a “fence” around the course as means of isolating the course within itself and exploring how these tools support learner performance and interaction.

The findings of this study indicated that my use of asynchronous and synchronous video lectures facilitated student learning and participation by re-creating the face-to-face classroom setting. These communication modes allowed students to gain verbal feedback and direction

which reduced any potential feelings of anxiety and uncertainty when completing their assignments. In the online environment, students have the ability to direct their learning by working at their own pace. Having the opportunity to receive feedback and direction from their instructor, through the use of synchronous and asynchronous video lectures, provided the contextual support students needed as a means of motivating their success online (Chang & Jang, 2020). In this way, the instructor is seen as someone that is reachable in facilitating discourse and providing direct instruction which adds a human element to the course through the transfer of verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors (Baker, 2010; Bialowas & Steimel, 2019).

Facilitating discourse and providing direct instruction are key features of instructor presence that allow students to feel more confident in their understanding of the course content and support a student's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation within the course. Instructors should therefore incorporate both live and recorded video elements throughout their course as a means motivating student learning and participation. Motivation is seen as an antecedent to student success since it is the "first condition to take on a learning task and is the engine that powers the process" (Mese & Sevilen, 2021, p. 12). Therefore, further research exploring how an instructor's use of synchronous and asynchronous video lectures motivates students within the online learning environment is paramount to understanding the elements that need to be added to an instructor pedagogical toolbox.

Additionally, the findings of this study indicated that my use of the discussion board created an avenue for peer feedback and student creativity but also showcased much of the dilemma that is presented in the literature with regard to the use of discussion boards within an online course. The literature showcased the discussion board as a collaborative tool that supported interactivity among students (Kent et al., 2016) which is supported by this study.

However, the literature also viewed the discussion board as inadequate in stimulating student engagement and participation (Gao et al., 2013). The mixed view of the discussion board showcases the need for further research on how discussion boards are created and what students are asked to do within the forums. Since the discussion board allowed students to “talk” with each other and share different points of view, it can aid in reducing student isolation and lack of interpersonal connection. The success of the discussion board within this study indicated a strong preference for active instructor presence on a consistent basis. The consistent display of my presence through open and affective communication, the facilitation of discourse, and the instructional design of the forums, allowed for the creation of a constructivist learning environment. The literature supported the role of constructivist learning environments in facilitating student learning, participation, and interaction (Hathway, 2013; Keengwe et al., 2013). The findings of this study further supported instructor presence as a catalyst in setting this learning environment or climate. This means that instructors must incorporate active and consistent displays of emotion and commentary within the discussion board in order to “encourage students to internalize and re-shape information through active consideration” (Liaw, 2004, p. 313).

Additionally, instructors should also consider what is being discussed and how the discussion of the learning concepts are displayed within the discussion forum. Mehta et al. (2017) explained that “the instructor has to think through the course learning outcomes and then design the learning activities and lessons that would engage students and stimulate interaction” (p. 122). The findings of this study highlighted that the display of the learning content in a graphical or video format created student buy-in and connection with the course material by allowing students to actively participate in knowledge creation. In much the same way that

students are viewing graphic and video content in their everyday lives, instructors should replicate everyday social activities that students are already engaged in (reading tweets, viewing short videos, posting GIFs, and reading infographics) in the discussion forum. By allowing students to interpret and display the course material based on their experiences, the monotony of the text-based discussion forum can be transformed into a social constructivist space ripe for student learning and participation. Further research is therefore needed to explore how the use of graphic and video displays of course content within the discussion board facilitates the kinds of interaction and engagement needed for a deeper and optimal online learning experience.

The success of the communication modes I used within the online course was promulgated by instructor presence. The following instructor presence categories: facilitation of discourse, direct instruction, open and affective communication, group cohesion, and instructional design and organization, were enabled by the communication modes and created a social environment that supported instructor immediacy and community building within the course. These factors reduced the students' feelings and isolation and created greater opportunities for interpersonal connections among students and between students and me.

Research Question 2: How does my presence shape students' online course experience?

My presence positively shaped students' online course experiences by allowing for greater instructor immediacy and by eliciting feelings of mattering among students. My social and pedagogical interaction (presence) with students was defined in terms of my self-disclosure, consistent feedback, and how I showed care towards students within the online course. Each of these examples showcased the following instructor presence categories: facilitation of discourse, direct instruction, open and affective communication, group cohesion, and instructional design and organization, which highlighted the fact that teaching cannot simply be relegated to

instructional responsibilities. The very essence of teaching is social and has a reciprocal value when employed within the online learning environment.

Students valued getting to know me as a “real” person through my self-disclosure of personal and professional aspects of my lives. Students found greater connection with me because they could be connected to my world and also through their perception that I wanted to be connected to them. Self-disclosure is an indicator of the open and affective communication category of instructor presence as it showcased my use of emotion, humor, and the sharing of stories. Self-disclosure as presence humanized the online course environment because it displayed instructor immediacy behaviors as well as the attention dimension of mattering.

The “attention” dimension of mattering referred to an individual’s feeling of being noticed by another person (Rosenberg & McCollough, 1981). My presence through self-disclosure created an online environment where students felt heard and acknowledged and also one where their experiences were recognized. The extant literature showcased the role of instructor immediacy as a factor that supported student participation within an online course. Williams (2010) stated that “an instructor who practices immediacy shows the student his/her “humanness” and understanding through such behaviors.” (p. 12). Therefore, instructors should be more open to the social aspect of teaching and expand their role beyond solely transactional responsibilities. By creating an environment where open and affective communication can be utilized by both the instructor and students, instructors can build a trusting environment where students feel supported in their learning and valued within the course. In this environment, students will be more inclined to ask questions, share aspects of themselves, and reach out for help. Understanding how instructors implement self-disclosure within their course, given its personal nature, requires further research in order to define and provide an in-depth view of this instructor presence indicator and its connection to the theory of mattering.

My consistent use of feedback is an indicator of the direct instruction and facilitating discourse category of instructor presence. The use of consistent feedback throughout the course supported student learning and satisfaction by giving students confidence in meeting the course expectations. It further supported the display of instructor immediacy and the appreciation dimension of mattering that supported student learning within the course. The appreciation dimension referred to how a person feels when their efforts are appreciated (Schlossberg, 1989). In this study, students could receive direction and engage in discussions that supported their successful completion of their assignments, extrinsically motivating them to persist within the course. Instructors should therefore consider the added value of continuous feedback, rather than resorting to incremental feedback, as a means of supporting student success. Whether this feedback should be face to face (via asynchronous or synchronous video) or written (in the discussion board or GroupMe chat) requires further research to explore how an instructor's use of the communication modes is perceived by students as supporting and investing in their success.

Aspects of my personality and demeanor were perceived by students as compassion and care for their success within the course. Care is an indicator of the group cohesion and instructional design and organization category of instructor presence. By showing passion for the course content, a positive personality, and my willingness to offer help and encouragement, my presence created a warm and welcoming course environment that supported a sense of community and trust within the course. Rovai (2002) defined community as not bounded by a setting, but through feelings of belonging, a mutual understanding, and shared support of each other. Through the use of communication modes, such as the GroupMe chat and the synchronous video lectures, students felt that they belonged to a course environment where there was mutual understanding and support of each other (Rovai, 2002). Instructors should consider, in their design of their online course, that the formation of an online community is more than simply the

bounded setting of the course. It requires the display of care and compassion from the instructor as well as the incorporation of effective communication modes to support the community. These communication modes function as both formal and informal environments in which instructors can show care and compassion within their course design as a means of supporting student learning and participation. Further research is needed to explore the role of communication modes, such as the GroupMe chat and synchronous video lectures specifically, in creating personalized learning experiences and a sense of community for students.

Critique of the Community of Inquiry Framework

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework provided a clear understanding of the teaching and social presence elements that aided in the creation of an optimal learning environment for students within an online setting. Viewing these constructs separately informed how I analyzed and interpreted the data. However, it also shaped my understanding that both constructs must be combined to more accurately describe the learning experiences of students online. Therefore, I felt the need to adjust the CoI framework, updating the teaching presence construct and re-naming this construct as instructor presence within the framework. The use of the instructor presence construct better defines the social and teaching roles of an online instructor. I also recommend that the social presence construct be re-named as learner presence in support of the research by Shea et al. (2012). Learner presence is defined as the “the proactive stance adopted by students who marshal thoughts, emotions, motivations, behaviors, and strategies in the service of successful online learning” (p. 90). The findings within this study indicated that students displayed self-determination and agency in their learning, especially within the various communication modes, complementing the definition of learner presence by Shea et al. (2012). These features of student behavior, while outside the scope of this study, are

also not defined in Garrison et al. (2000) CoI framework either. Figure 6 showcases a revised version of the CoI framework based on the literature and findings of this study.

Figure 6

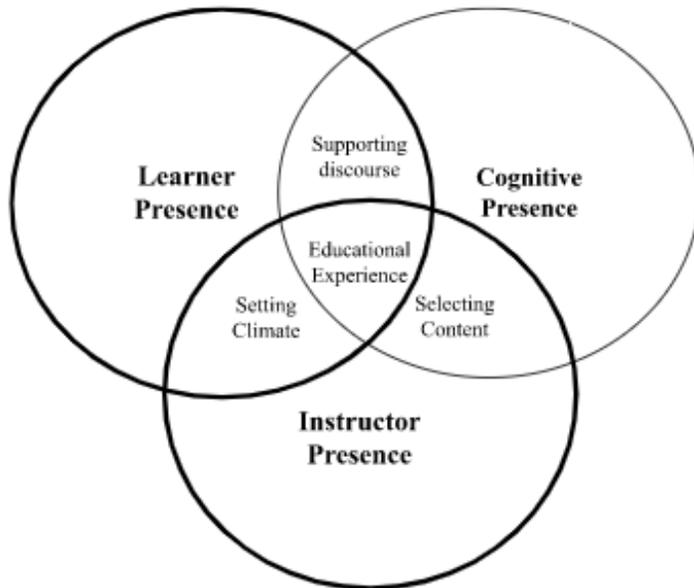


Figure 15 retains the three overlapping circles, but the names of the original teaching presence construct is changed to instructor presence and social presence construct is changed to learner presence. In the current CoI model, the teaching presence construct was established by analyzing an instructor’s visibility within threaded discussion boards. Garrison et al, (2000) focused solely on the managerial responsibilities of the instructor and studied an instructor's “visibility” as stagnant and without the human element. The findings of this study proved that an instructor’s “visibility” or presence is multifaceted. It goes beyond the discussion board, and functions both socially and pedagogically throughout the LMS, and beyond the LMS using various communication tools. The instructor presence element brings to light that teaching is social (Armellini and Stefani, 2016) and that being social within the classroom, especially an online course room, is a factor in online student success. The instructor presence construct highlights the immediacy and emotions of an instructor as they carry out their instructional tasks

and engage in communication throughout the course. The categories of instructor presence therefore include: the facilitation of discourse, direct instruction, open and affective communication, group cohesion and instructional design and organization.

Additionally, by revising the CoI framework to include learner presence the framework now accounts for the strategies and activities that make online learners successful within the online environment. The social presence construct within the current CoI framework by Garrison et al., (2000) focused on how learners project themselves socially and emotionally as “real” people yet fails to account for specific aspects of a student's full personality. The learner must be included as an element of presence within the CoI framework to account for the different traits and motivations of online learners that enable the creation of an optimal learning environment. (Harnett et al., 2011; Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). By tying together, the social and pedagogical roles of an instructor and incorporating the characteristics of successful online learners, the CoI framework can provide a better explanation of how an optimal learning environment can be achieved with today’s online students.

Implications for Practice

Based on the data and conclusions outlined in this chapter, I would like to recommend the following four (4) implications for practice for instructors designing and teaching online courses. These implications serve as recommendations for what instructors can implement as they design, navigate, and teach within the online environment.

Include both Synchronous and Asynchronous Videos

Live video lectures, where the instructor has their video on, must be incorporated within an online course on a consistent basis. Within a fifteen (15) week course, instructors should provide at least six (6), 50-minute face to face meetings that allow students to engage in on-topic

and off-topic conversations while receiving instruction. In designing live elements within the course, instructors should focus more on connecting with students and asking for their opinions during the lectures as well as providing opportunities for students to ask questions or insert their thoughts into the session. This creates a social environment for connection and collaboration.

Instructors should also include short recorded video lectures or explanations throughout the course. These videos should be no more than fifteen (15) minutes in length and instructional, where students can gain clarification on assignments or be provided with an example of how to complete an assignment successfully. These videos must be instructor authored to create a more personalized learning environment that humanizes the online course. The use of video communication, either through synchronous or asynchronous lectures, allows students the opportunity to connect with an audience outside of their own isolated learning space.

Create Constructivist Learning Environments

Constructivist learning environments “provide multiple paths for students to explore and provoke the kinds of thoughtful engagement where primary learning is placed on the student in a student-centered approach” (Keengwe, 2013, p. 889). Instructors should utilize communication modes, such as the discussion board, as sites where students can display their own interpretation of the learning content. The discussion board is a valuable communication mode for the co-construction of knowledge by students. Therefore, instructors must utilize this communication mode with this intent in mind and replace the monotony of the read-write-response format. Instructors can do this by giving students the opportunity to create their own documents, such as infographics, posters, and videos, that reimagine the course content and allow them to share their experiences. Additionally, instructors can allow students to engage in team activities, such as scavenger hunts, and graphically display their findings and team progress along the way. The

concept of allowing students control over their learning facilitates the kinds of interaction and engagement needed for an optimal online learning experience.

Humanize Your Course by Inserting Yourself Online

A humanized online environment is one where students see, hear, and communicate with the instructor in various ways. Having a humanized course denounces the misconception that taking a class online is one in which the course is “teacher-less”. Therefore, online instructors must show consistent instructor presence within their online course. Incorporating the following instructor presence indicators, such as self-disclosure, care, and feedback, creates a social environment where there is never a moment of silence. This dialogue exchange reduces the temporal and authoritative gap between students and instructor and is facilitated by the communication modes. Instructors should share aspects of their personality, personal, and professional life to create a “realness” that can aid in students’ willingness to learn and participate within the course.

To meet the needs of today’s online students, instructors must consider the social aspect to their teaching and create opportunities for community and connection between students and their professor. Areas, such as the discussion board, must not be left as a student only zone for interaction. Instructors should be especially active when using this communication mode given its mixed views of importance by students. This can be done by injecting knowledge from different sources within the forum, expressing appreciation and agreement, continuing a thread, expressing emotion, and acknowledging student contributions. Additionally, instructors should ensure that feedback is present on all assignments and clear details on areas that could be improved or different ways of approaching the assignment provided so that students feel a sense of appreciation when completing and submitting their work.

Communicate Beyond the LMS

Instructors should build in the use of either a social media tool(s) or MIM tool(s) within their course as a means of community building and out of class communication. This out of class communication can provide students with a greater sense of connection with faculty, as well as, with the course content. The use of social media tools within the formal education space provides an avenue to overcome some of the challenges experienced by students in the online learning environment. The use of MIM tools, such as GroupMe, within an online course can extend and reinforce the sense of community concept. It is highly recommended that as instructors implement these additions to their course, they are at the center of the conversation, provide direction on how the tool(s) will be used, and have consistent presence when using the communication mode(s) and throughout the lifespan of the course.

Recommendations for Future Research

This case study provided the descriptive experiences of how my communication modes and my communication presence positively shape students' learning, participation, and satisfaction within an online course. The findings of this case study are strong; however, given this study's scope, further research can be conducted to expand the body of literature exploring student experiences online. I will provide six ways that scholars can continue to explore the experiences of online students and how instructor presence and communication modes can shape their experiences.

Identify as a Source of Instructor Presence

Three participants referred to my gender, age and language (accent and dialect) as characteristics that informed their connection with me and shaped how they communicated with me within the course. One of the participants, Marie, explained that her judgment of me was

positive based on my gender and race, in that it was the same as her own. Nick explained that I was “nice and not out of touch” which made me easier to talk to. It would be worthwhile to understand how characteristics such as age, gender, race, and language shape how students perceive their online professors and how this perception shapes their experiences. Additionally, further research on the role of an instructor’s identity in shaping a student’s feelings of mattering within an online course could explore how this factor supports student motivation and persistence within an online course.

Characteristics of Online Faculty

Further research featuring auto-ethnographic studies of online instructors, at different institutions, sharing their experiences, competencies, and roles within the online environment, could provide descriptive details into the culture of online faculty. These studies would provide concurrent accounts of instructor experiences throughout the course that documented their journey as an online instructor, the issues faced within the online course, decisions made, intentional steps, and mishaps along the way. The research would support new and established online faculty in their teaching process as they navigate the online class or update their pedagogical toolbox. As the increase in online students and online education programs flourish, further empirical research into the traits or characteristics of online faculty would serve the profession as a guide to documenting aspects of personality and characteristics that are defined by instructors and students in shaping their course experiences.

Defining Instructor Presence

The term instructor presence and teaching presence have been used interchangeably within the literature. Yet this study showed that there is a difference in the two terms. Having in depth experiences from the perspectives of instructors as to how they define instructor presence

and teaching presence could provide additional qualitative research into the differences and provide further distinction between the two terms.

Course Design as a Factor Shaping Students' Experiences Online

In this study, several participants described that having multiple video elements as a part of the course design aided in their learning and participation within the course. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework satisfies what an optimal online environment should include but it does not yield information for designing such an environment. Therefore, further research is warranted to explore how the design of an online course and the use of text versus video elements shape students' online course experience. This research could also expand the use of CoI as a guide to designing online courses.

Mobile Instant Messaging Tools for Educational Use

Much of the extant literature focuses on social media tools, such as Twitter or Facebook, (Kim 2017; Kelly 2019) or on MIM tools for language development only (Rambe & Bere, 2013; Tang & Hew, 2017). There is a gap within the literature related to the use of MIM tools, such as GroupMe, in creating a sense of community online. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, MIM tools create a "fence" in that members using the tool are bounded within the social environment of the online course. This creates the potential for belonging, social interaction, and greater instructor presence. Therefore, further research exploring student perception of the use of GroupMe within an online course, possibly from a longitudinal approach, could significantly contribute to the literature on MIM tools for educational use within online courses.

Methodological Contribution

Online talk is unique in that it includes various elements of text and paralinguistic data such as the use of emoticons, GIFs, emojis and "likes" to communicate information and display

thoughts and feelings. Further research on how to interpret non-verbal aspects of student communication such as “likes” and GIFs within social platforms can shed light on how students communicate online and the consequences of these actions on their experiences within a course and with their instructor. While Paulus and Lester (2019) provide several approaches on analyzing online talk, there could be further research on how to combine aspects of conversational analysis and discourse analysis to form a qualitative approach to interpreting emotions, GIFs, emojis and “likes” used within a social platform. Additionally, not all students engage via text or para-linguistically within a social platform so research on how to interpret and analyze lurking behavior online could provide further insight into how students participate online and how lurking shapes their experiences within an online course.

Conclusion

By conducting this qualitative case study, I explored how the communication modes I used and my presence shape students’ online course experiences. Through the triangulation of three data sources, this study revealed that my communication modes positively shaped students’ experiences by creating an environment for interaction, learning, and participation among students and between students and myself. Students experienced greater instructor immediacy and direct instruction which helped them to better understand the course concepts. The communication modes I used also allowed for collaboration among students and between students and myself. The GroupMe chat, discussion board, and synchronous video lectures allowed students to connect with their classmates and develop friendships that formed the essence of an online community. These communication modes also allowed for greater socialization among students and between students and I, reducing feelings of isolation and transactional distance. Additionally, the findings indicated that students felt that they could be

themselves, ask questions, and gain feedback when using these communication modes, meeting their needs for online course success and motivating them to persist within the course.

One major caveat to the use of the communication modes was their strength when used consistently by me throughout the length of the course. The role of instructor presence within each of these communication modes created a climate for interaction, learning, and participation. This need for climate setting sits at the interaction of the teaching and social presence elements within Garrison et al. (2000) Community of Inquiry framework and was a pivotal factor in shaping students' online course experiences. This study also revealed that my presence positively shaped students' online course experiences by allowing for greater instructor immediacy and by eliciting feelings of mattering among students. My presence allowed me to display the following instructor presence indicators: self-disclosure, feedback, and care, which facilitated student learning, collaboration, and sense of belonging within the course.

This study serves as an in-depth example exploring instructor communication and instructor presence online. This study will allow instructors to analyze the ways in which they communicate and establish their presence within their course and how that shapes a student's experiences. This data generated and analyzed within this study will also allow online faculty to revise their communication strategy within the online learning environment in support of student interactivity and engagement using communication modes both within and beyond the LMS. While the use of the Community of Inquiry framework has continued to be a well-used model for online teaching and learning (Richardson et al. 2017; Stenbom 2018), my use and critique of the framework will offer administrators and/or directors of online programs the opportunity to review and implement sound and reliable techniques into their online faculty training programs. This study will ground their faculty in sound pedagogical practices that will be rewarding to their

students and motivate their success online. As a scholar - practitioner, I will continue to advance the research in the field of online education and online faculty development to meet the robust demand for quality online education programs.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN ONLINE EDUCATION

In fall 2019, there were 7,313,623 students enrolled in any distance education courses at degree-granting postsecondary institutions.

<i>Number and percentage of students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by distance education participation, and level of enrollment and control of institution: Fall 2019</i>										
Level of enrollment and control of institution	Number of students					Percent of students				
	Total	No distance education courses	Any distance education course(s)			Total	No distance education courses	Any distance education course(s)		
			Total, any distance education course(s)	At least one, but not all, of student's courses are distance education courses	Exclusively distance education courses			Total, any distance education course(s)	At least one, but not all, of student's courses are distance education courses	Exclusively distance education courses
Total	19,637,499	12,323,876	7,313,623	3,863,498	3,450,125	100.0	62.8	37.2	19.7	17.6
Level of enrollment										
Undergraduate	16,565,066	10,552,130	6,012,936	3,563,377	2,449,559	100.0	63.7	36.3	21.5	14.8
Postbaccalaureate	3,072,433	1,771,746	1,300,687	300,121	1,000,566	100.0	57.7	42.3	9.8	32.6
Control of institution										
Public	14,501,057	9,254,592	5,246,465	3,314,230	1,932,235	100.0	63.8	36.2	22.9	13.3
Private nonprofit	4,145,263	2,804,726	1,340,537	444,872	895,665	100.0	67.7	32.3	10.7	21.6
Private for-profit	991,179	264,558	726,621	104,396	622,225	100.0	26.7	73.3	10.5	62.8

NOTE: Data in this table represent the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Degree-granting institutions grant associate's or higher degrees and participate in Title IV federal financial aid programs.

APPENDIX B

STUDENT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

General Experience - Conceptualization

- Why are you taking courses online?
 - Describe how you feel learning within the online environment
 - Describe your interactions with your classmates online
 - Describe your interactions with your instructors online

RQ 1: How does my communication modes shape student online course experience?

Communication Tools

- Describe how you communicated within the course?
- Describe which communication tool(s) did you use mostly when interacting with me?
- Describe which communication tool(s) did you use mostly when interacting with your classmates?
 - Explain the ways the communication tool(s) was effective or ineffective?

Discussion Board

- Tell me about your experiences within the discussion board
- Describe how your course experience would change if the discussion board was not used?

Video Lectures

- Tell me about your experiences with the recorded lectures in the course
- Describe how your course experience would change if the video lectures were not used?

Live Lecture

- Tell me about your experience with the live lectures?
- How often did you attend live?
 - Why did you attend “live” lectures? OR
 - Why did you watch the recorded lectures?
 - Describe you felt watch the recording vs being “live”
- Describe how your course experience would change if the Live Lecture were not used?

Written Instructions and Announcements

- How would you describe the instructions presented within the course?

GroupMe

- Tell me about your experience with the live lectures?
- Describe your thoughts regarding using GroupMe within the course?
- Describe your interaction with GroupMe?
- Describe how your course experience would change if GroupMe chat was not used?

RQ 2: How does my presence shape students’ online course experiences?

- Describe your perception of my communication within the course
- Describe what you found most rewarding about my communication within the course
- Describe what you found least rewarding about my communication within the course
- Describe what you enjoyed most about my communication with you.
 - Explain why

- Describe a situation where we interacted within the course
- Tell me a time where you felt connected with me in the course
- Tell me a time where you felt supported by me within the course
- Describe how your course experience would change if my communication was opposite to what you experienced within the course.

Final Thoughts

- Which three communication tools shaped your overall experience within the course?
- What aspect of my communication shaped your overall experience within the course?
- Is there anything else you would like to add regarding your online course experience?

APPENDIX C

IRB DOCUMENTATION

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA HUMAN RESEARCH PROTECTION PROGRAM

CONSENT FORM FOR NON-MEDICAL 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 Instructor Communication Online. This study is being conducted by Kimberley Williams, a student earning her PhD in Higher Education Administration at The University of Alabama.

What is this study about?

The purpose of this case study is to conceptualize student perception of instructor communication within a single online course. Furthermore, I aim to:

- Explore how instructor communication shapes student experience within an online course
- Explore in what ways instructor communication shapes student satisfaction within an online course
- Identify in what ways instructor communication shapes student learning within the online course

The findings generated from this study will aim to influence student engagement techniques by identifying the role of the instructor and instructor communication as a medium for student engagement.

Why is this study important—What good will the results do?

By focusing on student experiences, student voices about what they need from their online course instructor will be amplified. This will hopefully resonate with current and future online instructors so that their pedagogical practices include items such as active feedback, immediacy, community building that all aim to improve the interaction and participation of their students.

Why have I been asked to take part in this study?

You are a former student in GBA 300 – Business Communication. As a distance learning student your experience within this learning environment is key to the findings of this study

How many other people will be in this study?

I hope to interview approximately 32 students enrolled the online section of GBA 300 – Business Communication

What will I be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed virtually using Zoom, an online meeting software, about your experiences within your online course. Your interview will be recorded to be sure that all your words are captured accurately. All data will be stored on UA Box.

Your consent to participate in this study will also allow for the use of the GBA 300 class GroupMe transcript. This transcript will be a part of the review and analysis for this study. Your words and content will be used as a source of data to add credibility to this study.

How much time will I spend being in this study?

The interview should last about 30 - 40 minutes, depending on how much information about your experiences you choose to share.

Will being in this study cost me anything?

There will be no cost to participate in this study

Will I be compensated for being in this study?

Participants will receive a \$20 gift card for participating 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.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

You may find it pleasant or helpful to describe your experiences as an online student. You may also feel good about knowing that you have helped future online students and online professors design and teach quality content.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your privacy will be protected as all identifiers will be kept private. You will be given a pseudonym and your information will be saved in a password protected database. Our zoom interview will also be one on one so we can talk without being overheard. All identifiers on the GroupMe transcript will be removed and replaced with a pseudonym and your information will be saved in a password protected database.

How will my confidentiality be protected?

The only place where your name appears in connection with this study is on this informed consent. The consent forms will be kept on a secured system that is password protected (UA Box). All data will be labeled using pseudonyms chosen by you or me. None of the recorded content will have your name on it and once transcribed the content will be deleted.

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 University of Alabama.

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 email me, Kimberley Williams at kawilliams@cba.ua.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research study, would like to make suggestions or file complaints and concerns about the research study, please contact: Ms. Tanta Myles, the University of Alabama Research Compliance Officer at (205)-348-8461 or toll-free at 1-877-820-3066. You may also ask questions, make suggestions, or file complaints and concerns through the IRB Outreach Website at <http://ovpred.ua.edu/research-compliance/prco/>. You may email the Office for Research Compliance at rscompliance@ua.edu.

Proceeding to the following constitutes your consent to participate and certifies that you are 18 years of age or older. Please keep a copy of this informed consent form for your records.

Investigator - Kimberley Williams

January 26, 2022

Kimberley Williams
Department of Management
College of Commerce & Business Admin.
The University of Alabama
Box 870225

Re: IRB # 21-12-5243: "Student Perceptions of Instructor Communication Online"

Dear Dr. Williams:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research. Your protocol has been given exempt approval according to 45 CFR part 46.104(d)(2) as outlined below:

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

The approval for your application will lapse on January 25, 2023. If your research will continue beyond this date, please submit the annual report to the IRB as required by University policy before the lapse. Please note, any modifications made in research design, methodology, or procedures must be submitted to and approved by the IRB before implementation. Please submit a final report form when the study is complete.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



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

