The Faculty-Student Relationship Dynamic: A Study of Faculty Who Teach Online Courses at a Public Four-year University

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Abstract

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With the growing market for online courses in California and the United States, institutions must better understand how the faculty-student dynamic, defined as the interactions between faculty and students in the online environment, impacts student engagement and success. The purpose of this study was an in-depth exploration of faculty assumptions, perspectives, and lived experiences related to online courses in order to aid institutions and faculty in identifying effective practices for teaching in the online environment.

The study drew upon theories of online course design, technology-mediated communication, and faculty presence to answer three questions: How do instructors of online courses perceive their interactions with students? What instructional practices do these faculty members believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses? Why do faculty members believe the identified instructional practices have positive impact on student success? This study employed a phenomenological qualitative methodology entailing open-ended, face-to-face interviews of six professors from diverse subject areas at California State University, Sacramento, a four-year public institution of higher education.

The study’s findings related to a) the efficiency of the online modality, b) the effects of class size, c) methods for maximizing student motivation, engagement, and interaction, d) the tracking of outcomes, e) computer literacy (of both students and faculty), and f) the policing of student contributions and cheating. The study resulted in three main conclusions. First, faculty-student interaction was seen as essential to student success and engagement but difficult and time-consuming to promote, especially if traditional teaching methods are employed. Second, greater faculty use of interactive tools and practices was related to their attitudes toward and familiarity with technology and associated with more favorable assessment in terms of impact on student engagement. Third, impact on student engagement and success was believed to be related to the applicability of both instructional practices and course discipline to the online environment. Broader cultural and economic factors shaping student motivation, student computer access and literacy, and cheating were also identified as factors impacting student success. Recommendations are made for policy change, reform of institutional practices, and future research.
Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation work to my family who has endured the journey with me. A special feeling of gratitude to my husband and children, whose words of encouragement and push for tenacity ring in my ears. Their support gave me the courage to expand my education, realize my goals and overcome life’s challenges.

I also dedicate this dissertation to my special friend and “sister,” Sara, who has supported me throughout the entire process and is an everlasting reminder that one conversation can change everything. I could not have done this work without all of you.
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The creation of this research project and educational journey I chose has been an arduous one. In fact, it has been a transformative project that has come to pass with the help of so many wonderful and talented people in my life giving me the support and encouragement necessary to succeed. This dissertation would not have been possible if it were not for these extraordinary individuals.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

This phenomenological research study was an in-depth exploration of lived experiences of faculty who teach online courses at California State University, Sacramento. The phenomenological approach was used to discover faculty assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes to better understand their experiences with instructional practices though the online learning situation in their courses. The goal of the study was to identify effective instructional practices leading to student engagement and assimilation of course content for optimal learning in online courses at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). The research will better inform institutions and faculty at CSUS of instructional practices intended to achieve increased levels of online course success rates within the California State University system.

Introduction to the Problem

Higher education institutions in the United States are experiencing rapid growth trends with online learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2010), 5.6 million university higher education students in the United States were taking at least one online course during the Fall 2009 term. The total represents an almost 1 million increase in numbers of students taking online courses than reported in 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Higher education in the state’s public sector is experiencing fiscal challenges causing colleges and universities to reduce the numbers of entering students, while demand for higher education degrees increases (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2012). With the ongoing concern regarding rising costs for students, online learning modalities hold the promise of providing access to more students. A number of benefits are offered through
distance education with the advancement of technology tools, social networking, and collaborative learning environments. Moreover, recent technological advances have opened up new opportunities for colleges and universities in online learning (Arnold, 2007).

In California, community colleges are the largest provider of online learning in higher education. Second to the California Community Colleges (CCC), California State University (CSU) offers the most significant amount of instruction using online delivery methods (Legislative Analyst Office [LAO], 2010). Online courses have been offered at CSU institutions since 1990, and there are more than 60 online degree programs in existence. In 2010, CSU implemented the CSU Online Initiative that will address California’s expanding workforce needs and increase access to high quality education. California State University, Sacramento, one of 23 CSU universities, has increased its offering from 20% to 67% of courses in an online instructional format (California State University Academic Senate, 2012).

Although proponents of online education in the CSU system in California recognize the market demand for distance learning, the culture of public traditional brick-and-mortar institutions remains ambivalent toward online education (Yick, Patrick, & Costin, 2005). Many critics in the CSU institutions have viewed distance education as not meeting pedagogical philosophies and being less academically rigorous and, therefore, less credible. There is also a concern that online learning in general “de-personalizes” education (Bowen et al., 2012, p. 7). Most criticism centers on the absence of real evidence of learning outcomes (Bowen et al., 2012).
This chapter begins with a statement of the problem, followed by the purpose of the research, significance of the problem, and questions driving this study. The conceptual framework is presented next, with the researcher’s personal stance and experiences related to the outlined topic. The elements of the conceptual framework are discussed, followed by a definition of terms used in this study. The research assumptions, limitations, and delineations for the study are outlined in the next section, followed by a chapter summary.

**Problem Statement**

Faculty often report difficulty establishing dynamic connections with online students, and exploration of the online faculty-student relationship dynamic is useful for understanding how the forces that shape this dynamic may impact student success in the online environment.

**Purpose and Significance of the Problem**

**Purpose**

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to study in depth the dynamic of the faculty-student relationship in the online learning environment from the lived experience of faculty who teach online courses at California State University, Sacramento. For the purpose of this study, the *faculty-student relationship dynamic* is defined as the phenomenon that occurs when faculty interact through various methods in the online learning environment throughout the course. The study included exploration of the perceptions, challenges, and overall experiences of individual faculty who taught online courses at California State University, Sacramento. The study may have led to identification of successful methods for faculty-student interactions, aiding teaching
practices to enhance levels of engagement and increase student success rates.

Institutions of higher education learning can also become better equipped to facilitate and support faculty-student interaction to achieve higher levels of engagement and reduce attrition in online courses.

**Significance of the Problem**

Enrollment in online courses has continued to grow rapidly. Higher education in the public sector continues to face fiscal challenges in budget reductions, resulting in creation of innovative methods to deliver courses to meet student enrollment demands. With the push to significantly increase online course offerings within CSU institutions, distance education expansion is an integral component of long-term strategic planning goals. Although the market demand exists, leaders in public higher education institutions provided the following response when questioned on introducing Interactive (online) Learning Offerings at their institutions:

Absent any real evidence of learning outcomes there is no possibility of persuading most traditional colleges and universities, and especially those regarded as thought leaders, to push hard for the introduction on online learning technologies that begin to substitute machine-guided instruction for traditional forms of teaching in appropriate settings. (Bowen et al., 2012, p. 9)

Although the culture may present challenges for some proponents of distance learning in the public sector, its growth is inevitable with the current demand and initiative for online education expansion. Hence, addressing best practices in online course delivery to achieve positive student learning outcomes is warranted. Prior research has suggested online learning outcome data are needed for public four-year higher education institutions (Bowen et al., 2012). In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education sponsored a meta-analysis of 28 studies of online learning. The analysis
originally included 28 studies of online learning resulting in findings, lauded by 
proponents, suggesting student learning outcomes were superior to those in face-to-face 
courses (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009).

Jaggers and Bailey (2010), in a follow-up study conducted in response to the U.S. 
Department of Education study, concluded that while online learning is a promising way 
to enhance student access and advancement through college programs, the Department of 
Education report does not present evidence that sole online delivery produces superior 
learning outcomes for typical college courses, particularly among low-income and 
academically underprepared students. The researchers noted that without additional 
supports, online learning may even diminish progress among low-income and 
academically underprepared students.

Several researchers have found that online students can and often do outperform 
traditional students (Jaggers & Bailey, 2010; Maki & Maki, 2007; Means et al., 2009). 
Benefits of online learning are well known, but it also has its disadvantages, including 
high attrition rates due to diminished student engagement, inadequate training and 
support for faculty tasked with implementing and administering online courses, and the 
relative newness of different technologies available. The dynamic of faculty-student 
relationships is important to consider when teaching any course to determine the level of 
engagement and assimilation of course content. It is especially significant when faculty 
teach in the online learning environment where students are not only isolated from their 
instructor, but from fellow students as well. In higher education institutions, research 
supports that faculty, student, and institutional levels of engagement are linked to 
increased student success in online courses. Interaction between faculty and student
enhances the learning experience as well as student success in completing the course (Robinson & Hullinger, 2008).

Faculty teaching online courses often struggle to make dynamic connections with students that allow them to gauge the effectiveness of their instructional methods as related to student engagement and assimilation of content. Betts (2009) noted teaching faculty play a vital role in student engagement, retention, and long-term program sustainability, since their role often extends beyond classroom instruction. The strategies faculty use in teaching are instrumental for determining effective use of tools, activities, and interactions aimed at achieving student success (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Betts, 2009; Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007).

California State University, the largest and most diverse university system in the country, began a cyber-school expansion across 23 campuses in Fall 2012. The university currently offers 63 online degree programs with 19 for undergraduates, and institutions will need to expand to meet the increased demand for online education (California State University [CSU], 2011). With online education growth at CSU institutions, continuing efforts are being made to deliver more quality online courses and degree programs, with student retention and success being the highest priority. Prior research in higher education online programs provides evidence that successful completion of courses for students is tied to faculty, student, and institutional engagement (Angelino et al., 2007; Dennen et al., 2007). The growth within the CSU system has not allowed researchers to fully understand implications of the faculty-student dynamic in relation to success in online learning. Although online course offerings have been in existence at California State University, Sacramento for many years, limited research is
available on faculty perspectives teaching online courses. The role of faculty is critical in online courses (Betts, 2009), and an exploration of faculty-lived experiences is important to understand what perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs exist regarding instructional practices.

This study will aid in identifying gaps between faculty-perceived and actual effective instructional practices to better understand obstacles to student success at CSUS. Since existing data are limited and there is a move to increase online course offerings in the CSU system in California, an in-depth exploration of faculty-lived experiences teaching online was needed to identify effective instructional practices. The findings may provide valuable insight for institutions and faculty teaching online to aid in increasing levels of student engagement and assimilation of course content, essential to successful learning outcomes for students.

**Research Questions**

To determine the stated objectives of this study, the following questions were used to guide the research:

1. How do faculty perceive their interactions with students in an online course?
2. What instructional practices do faculty believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses?
3. Why do faculty members believe the identified instructional practices have positive impacts on student success?

To address the questions, a phenomenological research design was utilized to explore in depth faculty-lived experiences within the online environment and identify instructional practices viewed by faculty as impacting online student success.
The Conceptual Framework

Researcher’s Stance

The study was conducted utilizing a social constructivist approach by considering how social phenomenon of consciousness develop in social contexts (Gergen, 2009). This researcher believes studying the phenomenon of the faculty-student dynamic from the faculty perspective of experiences in the online environment is important for developing effective instructional practices to benefit students. The approach aided this researcher in focusing on faculty instructional practices while taking into consideration contingent variables such as technology and course design. The researcher believes the process allows social contexts to be used to construct meaning for faculty as well as institutions of higher education in determining learning outcomes. The researcher operates with the mindset that our experiences influence our research and perceptions and firmly believes in finding solutions to existing problems. This researcher also views the information from a pragmatic perspective, since the study is dealing with actual occurrences of faculty experiences and the lessons learned from them.

In addition to the social constructivist and pragmatic perspectives, rudiments of axiology motivate this researcher’s study. The knowledge of what is real and ideal for faculty experiences when teaching online courses is crucial for the purpose of the study. The participants in the study, this researcher believes, brought their own biases and judgments with them. Understanding what are real faculty experiences, and the ability to identify ideal or good experiences, can lead to a better-informed approach across academic institutions for effective instructional practices.
Creswell (2007) stated the importance of a researcher’s own experiences being brought into phenomenological research. Self-reflection is important when integrating one’s own experiences with the phenomenon of one’s research. This researcher believes personal experience with the phenomenon studied can allow truth and understanding of life to emerge. During the course of this study, the researcher was employed at the university site where the research was conducted. The position involved collaborating with distance education members and developing online courses for students. The researcher has been involved in faculty discussions of online growth in the public four-year institution and brought some knowledge of online learning, course design, and instructional development to the study.

The researcher’s involvement with online learning at the site was relatively new, which limited the perspective that could be brought to the study. Although personal experience was a factor, the researcher recognized the importance of identifying any of her own assumptions and preconceptions that may have impacted the study. To safeguard the research process, several data sources and methodologies were utilized, in addition to regular consultation with the researcher’s dissertation committee chair.

**Research Framework**

The framework is composed of the mental models with intersecting elements studied, as illustrated in Figure 1.
The relationship dynamic of faculty and students is shaped by instructional practices in the online environment. The framework illustrates several elements explored in the study along with experiences of faculty who teach courses online. To better understand the phenomenon existing within online learning environments, it is essential to explore faculty-student relationships from the faculty perspective of existing mental models and actual experiences regarding instructional practices and their impact on student success.

In addition to exploring elements within the framework, literature and existing studies were examined to provide a cognitive framework for studying the relationship dynamic phenomenon. The research and theories used in this study are illustrated in
Figure 2. The framework demonstrates three areas of theory that intersected in exploring the faculty-student relationship dynamic in this study.

The advent of web-based education competition has contributed to the speed with which many traditional universities/colleges have adopted online course offerings in an attempt to compete for the student market. With the rise of enrollment in online courses, there is a need to better understand how traditional higher education institutions are meeting students’ learning needs. An exploration of the faculty-student relationships through use of technology-mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence is compulsory to identify ways to enrich student engagement and
successful completion of online courses. This study explored the phenomenon of these three streams, which congregate in the online environment and impact faculty instructional practices and student learning. The conceptual framework interconnects to provide a foundation for exploring successful methods of faculty-student relationships in the online learning environment.

The first stream considered was the types of technology-mediated communication existent between faculty and students. There is not a single learning approach most suitable in every situation (Lao & Gonzales, 2005). Technology-mediated communication encompassed whatever tools, activities, or interactions faculty viewed as a driving force for student engagement. These communication media may substitute for face-to-face interaction. Course content can be delivered through a wide range of learning venues that exist along a continuum of combinations of synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Technology quality, reliability, and accessibility are important determinants of learning effectiveness (Beer, Clark, & Jones, 2010). When exploring instructional practices, it is necessary to understand that not all faculty take to the online approach utilizing technology mediation in the same way (Arnold, 2007; Chen, Lamberty, & Guidrey, 2010). Faculty who are not trained, prepared, or experienced with technology use in the online learning environment may be limited in effective use of tools to achieve higher levels of student engagement. An analysis was needed, but had to consider differences in faculty use of technology mediation and pedagogy in the online learning environment.

The second stream discussed describes those factors that should be considered in course design for online curricular offerings, followed by an examination of the
constraints on promoting faculty-student interaction in online environments. One researcher promoted the idea of a shared process for course development including both instructors and technology personnel (Daniels, 2009). The course development and design process represents an opportunity for participative interactions among faculty and students, but a number of factors must be taken into account in order to achieve optimal results (Podoll & Randle, 2005; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). Over the past two decades, many higher education institutions have utilized instructional designers for online course development to maximize social learning. The basis for the idea is to design courses that will foster interactions to increase student engagement, which impacts student success rates. The elements of online course design remain relatively new to many educators, and this newness required a careful analysis of how these elements apply to virtual settings and student learning (Koehler, Mishra, Hershel, & Peruski, 2004).

The third stream of research involved investigating faculty presence in the online classroom to better understand how the role of instructor impacts the phenomenon. Exploring faculty presence in online courses involved looking at strategies used in instructional practice, which could be instrumental in determining what effective interaction improves outcomes for students. The general idea consisted of the instructor’s presence being an important factor when engaging students, as a social phenomenon in online learning helps translate virtual activities into impressions of real ones. Grandzol and Grandzol (2006) presented the idea that the most essential factor for a successful online education experience is the quality and quantity of interaction between faculty and students to foster student engagement. Students need to “feel a personal and emotional connection to the subject, their professor, and peers” (p. 7).
Researchers of online learning recognize the importance of having a sense of community within the online environment. In an effort to combat isolation of students, strategies involving greater use of synchronous technology for successful communication, interaction, and sense of faculty social presence should be integrated (Betts, 2009). Faculty who teach online courses need to be engaging, innovative and student-learning centered (Bonk, 2009). Faculty who lack training with the use of synchronous tools to provide a sense of faculty presence in the classroom are not maximizing opportunities to engage with students to achieve optimal results in learning outcomes.

**Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of this research, the following terms will be defined as stated:

**Asynchronous**
An indication that communication or coursework is not expected to be completed at a scheduled time or simultaneously by all participants. Courses do not have regular meeting times.

**Computer-mediated communication**
Use of computerized technology as a medium for interaction between two or more individuals. The process of utilizing telecommunications technology to facilitate communication between instructor and student or student and student.

**Course completion**
A student registered for a course maintains their status and participates through the end date. Completing the course does not imply the student received a passing grade for the class.
Course design

The process of creating educational experiences through instruction that make the acquisition of knowledge and skills more effective. The process involves determining the current needs of the learner, defining the goals for the course, and creating instructional practices for learning.

Distance education

Interchangeable with “distance learning,” refers to courses in which the instructor and student are separated by distance and/or time.

Distance learning

Interchangeable with “distance education,” refers to courses in which the instructor and student are separated by distance and/or time.

Face-to-face course

A traditional classroom course in which the instructor and students meet at the same time, in a classroom setting.

Faculty

Any individual assigned to teach a course. Faculty may be referred to as “instructor” or “teacher” in literature.

Faculty-Student dynamic

The experiences of faculty-student relationships in the online environment, to include factors impacted by prior experiences, the use of various technologies, and course design approaches.

Higher education

Post-secondary education in a college or university.
Institution

Any college or university that offers post-secondary education degrees.

Learning management system

Commonly referred to as LMS, a web-based software that provides an electronic learning environment for students and faculty. The software provides activities, discussions, forums, and the ability to administer tests or quizzes and accept students’ coursework, either attached or uploaded.

Social networking

Internet-based or online website applications which allow users to share information across the Internet. The students create profiles and utilize different sites based on preferences.

Synchronous

An indication that communication or coursework is expected to occur at a pre-scheduled meeting time. Synchronous courses require participation of the student and instructor at the same time. Regardless of location of students, technology is used to allow students and instructors to meet at the same time.

Technology-mediated communication

Use of computerized technology as a medium for interaction between two or more individuals. The term is used to describe the process of utilizing telecommunications technology to facilitate communication between instructor and student or student and student.
**Traditional brick-and-mortar institution**

A college or university that provides higher education degree programs in a physical setting at a specific location.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Assumptions**

The researcher held several assumptions based on experience working in higher education. The initial assumption which surfaced with this study was remedial or resistant use of technology by faculty in the online learning environment at a traditional brick-and-mortar institution. Therefore, it was important to consider reasons for resistance, as well as how faculty view their role in teaching online courses.

Advancements in technology have surpassed traditional boundaries of higher education. Online learning is continuing to be a market demand. Faced with the growth of online learning, faculty are still struggling to learn how to effectively navigate online courses and maximize technology use for effective instructional practices. The second assumption was the importance of faculty, student, and institutional engagement in online courses to achieve successful outcomes. There is never a one-size-fits-all in terms of effective engagement strategies, but the ability to teach in an environment that promotes interaction is beneficial for keeping students connected to the course. It is safe to say that not all experiences with instruction will be positive, and the objective is to build on and learn from the positive ones. The third assumption was formulated from the distance factor for students who enroll in online courses. Distance is not necessarily location, but a feeling of disconnect due to lack of the human element found in traditional classroom settings. Lastly, faculty may view taking on more pedagogical and social roles in online
courses as increased workload. The expectation to be available online at different
times and constantly interacting with students is not appealing. Faculty tend to
depersonalize their presence, which does not always lead to a sense of accomplishment
for students or faculty at the end of the course.

Limitations

There is limited research available focusing on the faculty voice with their
experiences in the online learning environment. Most of the research studies done focus
on faculty employed at campuses who do online instruction as part of their workload.
There is minimal existing research at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) on
faculty perspectives of online education within the institution. This study was designed
to include participation of both adjunct and full-time faculty from CSUS; however, the
student population was not included. This may have limited the scope of knowledge in
understanding the faculty-student dynamic. The researcher reviewed artifacts and
recognized, through analysis, student perceptions of the faculty-student dynamic.

Another factor considered was the number of courses offered through online formats
which, depending on subject, could be minimal at CSUS. Lastly, there are 23 CSU
campuses, and this study was only conducted at one site. The culture of the institution
may vary from the other campuses, which limits the potential to generalize the findings.

Delimitations

The study included faculty with a range of experience who have taught both
online and face-to-face courses at California State University Sacramento. Efforts were
made to have participants from several different content areas.
Summary

Distance education is continuing to grow, and with the expansion of CSU online courses, there is significant reason to identify effective practices for student success. This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research methodology and was conducted at California State University, Sacramento, a large four-year public higher education institution. The goal of the study is to gain an in-depth understanding of the faculty-student dynamic to better inform instructors and institutions of effective instructional practices for engagement leading to students’ successful completion of online courses.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Problem

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore, in depth, lived experiences of faculty teaching online courses at a California four-year public university to inform instructional practice and alleviate barriers to student success. Online education is expanding across all 23 CSU universities in the State of California. Faculty who teach online courses often report difficulty establishing connections with students in the online environment. This may present limitations in soliciting information and feedback to gauge effectiveness of instructional practices and assimilation of content. An in-depth exploration of the faculty-student relationship dynamic may provide traditional brick-and-mortar four-year public institutions and faculty with successful methods of instruction and engagement to enhance student success in online courses. Institutions of higher education learning can also become better equipped to support faculty-student interaction and reduce attrition in online courses.

Conceptual Framework

With the advent of technology, there is enormous opportunity to integrate new mechanisms and concepts in the online learning environment. To better understand the dynamic of faculty-student relationships existing within distance-learning environments, an exploration of technology-mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence are needed. By enhancing student engagement through technology-mediated communication, course design and faculty presence, the learning experience may be enriched and may result in students’ successful completion of the
This study explored the phenomenon of these three constructs from the faculty perspective. The conceptual framework combines to provide a foundation for exploring successful methods of faculty-student relationships in the online learning environment.

Figure 3. Conceptual framework of faculty-student dynamic.

The first stream considered is the types of technology-mediated communication that exist between faculty and students. There is not a single learning approach most suitable in every situation (Lao & Gonzales, 2005). Technology-mediated communication encompasses whatever tools, activities, or interactions faculty view as a driving force for student engagement. Course content can be delivered through a wide
range of learning venues that exist along a continuum of combinations of synchronous and asynchronous interactions. Instructors who are not trained, prepared, or experienced with technology use in the online learning environment may be limited in effective use of tools to achieve higher levels of student engagement.

The second stream discussed describes those factors that should be considered in developing and designing online curricular offerings, followed by an examination of the constraints on promoting student engagement in online settings. This stream involves far more than simply placing existing course content online and expecting positive academic outcomes. The course design process represents an opportunity for participative interactions among faculty and students, but a number of factors must be taken into account to achieve optimal results (Podoll & Randle, 2005; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009).

The third stream encompasses faculty presence in a variety of forms within online courses. Although the pedagogical approaches used for delivering high-quality educational services in the classroom can be applied to online venues (Bressler, Bressler, & Bressler, 2010), there is far more involved than simply transferring existing curricular offerings to a series of web pages to assure student engagement in the curricular offerings (Sull, Kim, Chung, Yoon, & Choi, 2009). Exploring faculty presence in online courses involves strategies used in instructional practices, which can be instrumental in determining what effective interaction improves outcomes for students (Bennett & Monds, 2008). The penultimate stream describes ways faculty can develop more effective instructional practices for their online courses to enhance faculty-student relationships.
Literature Review

Online learning in higher education has advanced significantly with the rising demand for postsecondary education. The pace of technology advancement has continued undiminished, resulting in progressively prevalent network connectivity (Alavi, 2004). Although there has been significant progress in the last two decades in higher education, further exploration of technology-mediated communication use by faculty in online courses is needed to determine if there is systemic or sustained impact on process of instruction (Hall, 2008). Educators can gain an enhanced understanding of the intricacies of online interactions by examining the basic context of online instructions and how and why they are used; and then take steps to improve the quality of these communications. The general idea is the instructor’s presence is an important factor when engaging students, as social phenomena in online learning help translate virtual activities into impressions of real.

Institutions of higher education and their faculty are starting to realize the need to develop pedagogies that facilitate distance education (Bowen et al., 2012; Reeves & Reeves, 2008). Exploring online course design is necessary to understand the impact of instructional practices utilized for faculty-student interaction. Research seems to indicate that increased interaction in an online environment enhances engagement, leading to students feeling more connected to faculty, peers, and university (Daymont, Blau, & Campbell, 2011).

The three-streams technology-mediated communication online course designs enhance engagement and interaction. When they are integrated with the role of faculty presence in navigating challenges with technology-mediated communication in online
courses, potential solutions may be identified to improve student success in online learning. The three streams provide an actionable framework for faculty and students to create higher levels of engagement for successful learning outcomes.

**Technology-mediated Communication**

The fundamental differences existing between online communications compared to traditional brick-and-mortar classrooms present a number of factors for educators to consider. When the level of face-to-face communication decreases, technology becomes more important for instructors to build relationships and engage students in learning. Appropriate use of technology to serve an instructional purpose tends to be another challenge for online education instructors. Technology-mediated communication provides an abundance of tools to support interactions with students. Technology-mediated communication is a factor in all online learning interactions, regardless of type or classification. The research supports that transactional distance between learners and instructors in a distance-learning setting often leads to psychological and communication gaps (Chen et al., 2010; Dziuban et al., 2007). The gaps must be overcome by appropriate instructional practices through technology-mediated communication.

**Synthesis**

Traditional university students are changing from preferring traditional brick-and-mortar classroom settings to seeking out distance education courses (Jackson & Helms, 2008). Many students are demanding distance education to meet their needs. The growth of online courses counterparts advances in technology. In the online course environment, asynchronous and synchronous, technology-mediated communication exchanges are an integral part of communication for both faculty and students. Studies done in this area
have examined all forms of technology use; such as email, Wimba, Skype, or discussion boards. Advancements in technology have provided the ability to navigate through metadata surrounding student interactions in the online learning environment. Arnold (2007) found that faculty used the tools at rudimentary levels. Systems are in use for faculty to identify students who may be moving away from success, allowing interventions to occur to retain them. Technology enhancements provide faculty and students an opportunity to expand social presence within distance education courses and bridge any existing gaps. Employing these new technologies enables communication across the world. The new collaborative approaches build on previous tools often utilized by a new generation of learners. Establishing effective practices for communicating in distance education programs should include the use of the multiple technology tools. Further research is needed to determine whether innovative technology tools will not only help with communication, but enhance faculty-student relationships to increase levels of engagement for student success.

Arnold, 2007

Arnold (2007) studied pedagogical or utilitarian applications with technology-mediated communication learning in foreign language courses. Instructional technology has become a required course for teacher training programs, as technological advances have significantly improved capability for distance learning, as well as tools for classroom pedagogy. The researchers surveyed 173 instructors who teach foreign language courses in higher education. The results from this research suggest that the majority of instructors, both online and classroom-based, do use technology at fundamental levels. The study provided a detailed theoretical look at the way in which
technology drives pedagogical theory and changes the manner of approach of distance learning. The research is clearly relevant in addressing the fact that faculty knowledge of technology use is less than their students’, limiting opportunities to maximize student learning in the online environment.

**Beer, Clark, and Jones, 2010**

According to this exploratory study, initial data obtained from learning management systems can be used as an indicator of student engagement and how patterns in the data have changed in online undergraduate education within one university’s adoption of MOODLE as its single management system. The study suggested that students’ activity, involvement, and effort in their learning are related to their academic achievement. Faculty who utilize a learning management system (LMS) in an online course will be better equipped to identify students’ level of engagement and use the information for instructional purposes, as well as implement strategies to heighten engagement for student success. The study suggested faculty who use an LMS can measure, inform, and improve student engagement; but consideration should be given to other factors, which may impact levels of engagement, such as teacher participation, course design, class size, age, and gender.

**Chen, Lambert, and Guidrey, 2010**

Chen et al.’s (2010) study was done using existing data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Using the quantitative approach, it explored the relationship between technology use and student learning. The study investigated the nature of student engagement through analysis of data collected by the NSSE. The researchers reported an overall positive correlation between the use of technology,
measures of engagement, and learning outcomes (Chen et al., 2010). Results for this study revealed that web-based and learning technologies continue to have a positive impact on learning outcomes for students. This research clearly supports that the use of technology-mediated communication provides effective tools for increasing levels of engagement and assimilation of course content in the online environment.

**Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy, and Shea, 2007**

Dzubian et al.’s (2007) research was funded by the Sloan Foundation and focused on identifying the underlying dimensions of student satisfaction with online learning and elements that may potentially impact student satisfaction with asynchronous learning between the University of Central Florida and the University at Albany. The pilot study cited four engagement strategies with the use of different technologies, based on an observation that Net Generation students immerse themselves in pursuits involving digital media which, over time, have become increasingly portable. The premise was students’ personal technology devices are far more engaging than academic applications of technology. The research suggested instructional strategies need to be developed that will captivate students and increase levels of engagement in the asynchronous learning environment.

**Hall, 2008**

Hall’s (2008) research paper provided an illustration of how a technology screening process for delivering content in a non-residential MBA program could aid in measuring student performance. The research was conducted on two specific diverse academic disciplines. Hall suggested there are a wide range of online technology tools that can be used for faculty-student interactions, including chat rooms, bulletin boards,
and blogs. With respect to chat rooms, two basic alternatives were outlined in this research: a) linear (synchronous), which allows students to interact proactively in near-real time and b) threaded (asynchronous), allowing students to interact at different times (Hall, 2008). The primary focus in this study relied on the idea that learning venues using mostly asynchronous methods for interactive processes are better suited for individual knowledge acquisition. The research findings concluded that analytical-based classification techniques can effectively identify marginal students and allow faculty to provide additional learning resources for student success.

Joyce and Brown, 2009

Joyce and Brown (2009) explored mediation strategies applied to social networking tools. The purpose was to examine, through literature review, how utilization of tools such as MySpace or Facebook enhanced social presence for students participating in online courses. The researchers noted that using social networking tools to enhance social presence by students, who use the tools to create personal spaces from which they can connect with others, promotes interactions in the learning environment. The research warned educators guidance must be provided to ensure students are using the tools for educational purposes so these types of technologies can provide learning opportunities. The researchers concluded there is evidence in the literature to support the social networking concept, and suggested faculty should embrace the concept of communication media use to enhance learning, leading to meaningful interaction among faculty and students. This research provides an interesting perspective regarding mediative use of technology tools and their use in relationship building to enhance interactions in the online learning environment (Joyce & Brown, 2009).
Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw, 2006

Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw’s (2006) work addressed the challenges and limitations of online learning versus the needs and expectations of students who utilize this type of learning. The authors noted limitations of technology in web-based education. The theory as conceptualized by the authors suggested online learning environments lend themselves to a less hierarchical approach to instruction. This approach is also implied to meet the learning needs of students who take online courses due to convenience and availability. The work is presented in general terms, and did not provide clear findings, as did other works reviewed, to support the conclusions. An interesting perspective on the challenges and limitations of online learning, which can present barriers to achieving optimal learning outcomes for students, was presented in this literature. The findings are also beneficial to institutions and faculty who want to maximize learning for successful student outcomes in online courses.

Course Design

Many educators may have become overly reliant on one course design or teaching style to the exclusion of other approaches that may be more suitable for a given group of students. Prying busy teachers out of this “comfort zone of teaching” will require careful scrutiny of how the three elements affect teachers new to online learning environments, to ensure they are provided with the support and training they need to succeed. This step, of course, is also true of conventional classroom instructional practices, but some educators may attempt to rely on what they know and fail to make the effort to realign their instructional practices with these emerging online learning environments. In this regard, Koehler et al. (2004) emphasized, “When we talk about traditional face-to-face
courses, these issues often remain in the background, because with years of practice and familiarity, faculty develop a series of pedagogical scripts that allow them to function without reflection” (p. 27).

**Synthesis**

The literature supports course design being a collaborative, participative approach actively involving both technicians and educators in the process. Technicians responsible for technology used may lack the insight and background needed to interpret the relevance of a particular course component, while educators may likewise lack the expertise concerning the supporting technologies and their potentials. Daymont et al. (2008) suggested a variety of reasons students choose online courses, and those students who prefer face-to-face primarily prefer faculty presence in the learning environment. A recurring theme in the literature was to recommend institutions provide training for faculty development in teaching online courses. Technology-mediated communication techniques can be significant to bring the faculty presence into the online classroom through course design.

**Bach, Haynes, and Smith, 2007**

Factors to consider in online course development and design were outlined in research done by Bach, Haynes, and Smith (2007). The researchers suggested several key areas are relevant for students when developing a course. The researchers outlined as integral to consideration the factors of students’ personal abilities, orientation toward learning, level of readiness, and motivation as online learners. Although geographic distance may limit the ability of students and faculty members to meet face to face, Bach et al., presented that at least one such meeting is highly desirable to allow students to
meet each other and their teachers before commencing the online course of instruction (2007). When face-to-face meeting is not possible, the authors suggested a web-based orientation could be provided. The authors go on to recommend the idea of an introductory discussion board where students can post photographs and, based on a series of standard prompts from the moderator, provide some background information concerning their goals in the online learning environment in ways that can serve the same purposes as face-to-face meetings (Bach et al., 2007). The research supported course design being crucially instrumental in achieving student success in online courses.

**Chickering and Ehrman (1996)**

The older research study conducted by Chickering and Ehrman supported the theory with their finding that active learning is a way to engage students. The research recognized the importance of investigating further specific types of active learning or collaboration that students find engaging in online courses, and not just the faculty perspective of what engagement is within the course content. This study continues to be useful in research in the field of online learning and instructional practices for student success.

**Chitanana, 2012**

Chitanana’s recent study used a constructivist framework as the conceptual model to examine the International Education and Resource Network Science Technology and Math. The study consisted of 28 educators, working in different institutions and living in different countries, teaching an online professional development course. Participants in this study negotiated their own regimen of participation. The study was designed to understand how the iEARN online course supported teachers’ learning through
constructivist principles. The results echoed earlier research findings regarding the constructivist approach to course design creating a structure conducive to the development of professional skills by supporting learners, designing authentic tasks, constructing an environment for learner reflection, and incorporating collaboration. One significant factor with this study is that collaboration among peers enabled them to build a community-enhanced learning environment. The findings also noted it is not just the inclusion of technology tools but the manner in which they are used that creates sustainable relationships supporting integral course design when considering student success in the online environment. The results of the study will aid institutions and teachers in improving course content, instruction, delivery, and professional development.

Daymont, Blau, and Campbell, 2011

Daymont et al.’s (2011) mixed-methods research study focused on student preference of online or traditional face-to-face courses. The study consisted of undergraduate management students. The findings showed that students who preferred online courses did not cite learning advantages; oral communication and flexibility were significant factors when making their class choice, despite the belief that online courses require greater self-discipline. On the other hand, participants who primarily chose a classroom setting did so due to instructor/peer presence and interactions in the course. The study provided valuable insight into factors impacting a student’s preferences in taking online courses versus traditional classroom-setting courses.
**Jackson and Helms, 2008**  
In this research study, Jackson and Helms (2008) looked at the hybrid online format, defined as the face-to-face model of instruction with online components integrated. Students in the senior-level core business courses were surveyed using the SWOT analysis (strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats) to solicit their perceptions of the hybrid model. The researchers analyzed strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities in the model to find if the model met students’ needs. They found the same strengths and weaknesses existed in the model as did in the total online format. In addition, the researchers did not find the component of face-to-face interaction within the hybrid model made any difference to the outcome. The research did not take into account other variables such as age, gender, and traditional student versus non-traditional student, which does not allow for a broader perspective of the design. The research fits in well with the course design element in this study in that course design is a factor in delivering effective instructional practices within online modalities.

**Johnson and Aragon, 2003**  
Johnson and Aragon (2003) presented a framework for online course design and instructional practices for teaching in the online environment. Johnson and Aragon mentioned specific strategies in course structure that may be effective in increasing student engagement, based on their research. The strategies involved moving away from recorded lectures, readings, and tests toward a more interactive learning environment involving a virtual team, games, or case studies. The research also promoted moving away from modeling online courses after traditional ones and providing a structural
framework for motivation and instructional strategies. Although the framework was not fully developed at the time the research concluded, and further research was recommended to validate the study, findings do support the relevance and impact of online course design in creating online learning environments that aid student success.

**Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, and Peruski, 2004**

A study by Koehler et al. (2004) provided some useful guidance to address the numerous challenges and obstacles facing educational institutions in developing and designing online curricular offerings. The researchers noted challenges with faculty development for online teaching, particularly in learning how to provide instruction for courses so the experience is of high quality for both faculty and students (Koehler et al., 2004). The research suggested designing a collaborative, participative approach that actively involves both technicians and educators in the process to overcome constraints that may exist when developing online courses. Findings supported that maximizing input of experienced, knowledgeable individuals to develop and interpret online course components is necessary to produce quality courses. As a result, Koehler et al. concluded faculty can be held back by limited support offered at their institutions. This research presented an interesting perspective on faculty’s ability to optimize learning opportunities through course design, which may impact student learning if limited within higher education environments.

**Lear, Ansorge, and Steckelberg, 2010**

Lear, Ansorge, and Steckelberg’s (2010) mixed-methods research study supported interaction with instructor, peers, and course content being important to keep students engaged, active learners. The research focused on students in 30 online classes at four
Midwestern post-secondary institutions. The findings revealed interactivity within the course was significant to building a community environment for students. The findings also suggested that for students to be active, engaged learners, they needed to develop a sense of community through interactions within their courses. This study supported the importance of course design incorporating faculty-student interaction to engage students in the online learning environment.

Ray, 2009

Ray’s (2009) quantitative research study focused on perceptions of faculty who teach online courses. There were 300 surveys sent out with 111 responses for a 37% response rate (Ray, 2009). Participants were current instructors who were currently teaching an online course. A significant finding from this study was the desire of instructors to have more training on pedagogy and technology to be effective in teaching online courses. The participants’ responses indicated training should be mandatory for instructors prior to teaching their first online course and in addition revealed that moving from traditional face-to-face courses to online is a difficult process. The research is relevant for institutions providing online courses to recognize the format is different and training for instructors to teach online should be required for effective instructional practices. This study reiterated the theme in this area of the literature of course design, that institutions should provide training for faculty around teaching online courses, and offer professional development in transitioning from face-to-face to online instructional modalities.
Faculty Presence

Along with technological advancements, student demographics and learning needs have changed. Faculty have also evolved over the years, and most use some form of technology when teaching their courses; however, those relatively new to online instruction may need more exposure to strategies for successful instructional practices with online courses (Bailey & Card, 2009). On the opposite plane, faculty who have taught for years may need to expand their current mental models regarding teaching online courses, and move beyond basic interactions to more in-depth activities to enhance engagement. Improving instructional practices, enhancing social presence and student learning outcomes through faculty development, continues to be an important goal (Joyce & Brown, 2009; Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008). With respect to the quality of online relationships between faculty and students, there has been a general paucity of relevant research until relatively recently (Cohen & Ellis, 2005). Moreover, faculty members have been largely excluded from the research to date concerning distance education in general and online learning environments in particular until relatively recently (Hiltz & Goldman, 2004).

Synthesis

With the continued growth of online education, faculty presence in the classroom (whether virtual or traditional) continues to be tied to student success. Faculty who engage early on in the course are more likely to keep students motivated and persistent to complete the course. Understanding how the faculty role and teaching practices impact student success is necessary when identifying effective instructional practices (Bailey & Card, 2009). Faculty development emerges as an important aspect of developing
effective teaching practices in the online learning environment. The literature includes the importance of faculty presence and roles in motivating students through interactions in online courses. There is concern about the varying degrees of faculty presence and roles requiring more higher education institutions to promote faculty development as part of instructor training. The literature reviewed reveals faculty who facilitate faculty-student relationships and strive to build communities within their online courses are more likely to keep students engaged and persistent for successful course completion and assimilation of content (Angelo et al., 2007; Bennett & Monds, 2008; Betts, 2009; Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, & Woodard, 2011).

**Angelo, Williams, and Natvig, 2007**

Through an integrated research review, Angelo et al. (2007) explored attrition rates in higher education and strategies for reduction of attrition in higher education. At the time the research was conducted, attrition rates in online courses were cited to be 10-20% higher than in face-to-face courses. The study revealed students who feel isolated or disconnected from their peers are more likely to drop out of online programs. The researchers emphasized the importance of early, frequent, and consistent faculty-student interaction as a strategy to engage students in the course quickly. The idea that faculty should strive to deliberately build a learning community was prevalent. The researchers identified four key strategies: student integration and engagement, learner-centered approach, learning communities, and online student services, to be used to increase engagement in online courses (Angelino et al., 2007). The research is relevant when considering incongruity in student success rates in online courses.
Bailey and Card, 2009

The phenomenological study was conducted to identify effective pedagogical practices for online teaching from the perception of experienced instructors. The researchers explored what award-winning South Dakota e-learning instructors’ perceptions were regarding effective pedagogical practices (Bailey & Card, 2009). Eight themes for effective pedagogical practices emerged from the data collected and analyzed: fostering relationships, engagement, timeliness, communication, organization, technology, flexibility, and high expectations. The researchers cited three theoretical frameworks that informed their study: andragogy, constructivism, and transformational learning. The findings presented a need for factors from the eight identified effective practices to be integrated with more institutional support, including training for instructors who teach online. The findings are relevant to establishing the importance of faculty presence for effective instructional practices in the online environment.

Bennett and Monds, 2008

Bennett and Monds’s (2008) research paper examined literature related to online courses, provided insight to indicators that student success is attributable to intrinsic motivation, and revealed strategies faculty may use to increase intrinsic motivation in online courses. The researchers identified intrinsic motivation as a key factor in student success. The research suggested strategies for faculty to increase motivation to create a sense of community and noted that providing meaningful feedback will establish a connection with students in online courses. The research supports that increasing intrinsic motivation through enhancing perceived competence, interest, value, and
relatedness to faculty and other students will contribute to student success in online courses.

**Betts, 2009**

This research focused on the Online Human Touch (OHT) concept implemented in the Master of Science in Higher Education at Drexel University. The program was developed to provide training and support to proactively engage, connect, and retain online faculty. The framework for the study was initially developed in 2005 to support student engagement for retention in a new Master of Science in Higher Education (MHSE) degree program and is based on engagement, community development, personalized communication, work-integrated learning and data-driven decision-making. The core concept relevant in this theory was the more students are engaged in the course, the more likely they are to complete the course. The concept was also premised on faculty’s willingness to teach and continue teaching online if they felt engaged as online instructors, connected and supported by the program and campus community (Betts, 2009). The findings supported that OHT positively affects faculty engagement, connectivity, and retention. The research also supported the philosophy that intentional engagement by institutions and faculty is directly related to successful learning outcomes for students.

**Bonk, 2009**

Bonk (2009) emphasized the need for faculty and higher education institutions to be innovative in embracing methodologies that allow students to learn anywhere and anytime. The concept of promoting student success through engaging personalized learning environments was prevalent. In his work, Bonk advocated for interactivity with
and among students for a richer learning experience. Bonk is a leader in research on collaborative educational technologies and promotes a more learner-centered approach to instruction. He said students should have identified goals, rather than participate in simulated learning assignments for a better learning outcome (Bonk, 2009). Bonk’s work is significant in addressing the importance of faculty presence within the online course environment as a factor for achieving successful student learning outcomes.

**Brinthaupt, Fisher, Gardner, Raffo, and Woodard, 2011**

Brinthaupt et al.’s (2011) research paper focused on the eLearning Pedagogy Faculty Learning Community (FLC) at one university, using Bain’s (2004) book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*. The FLC is a group of interdisciplinary faculty within the university who engage in an active year-long program. The authors explored methods of fostering student engagement, stimulating intellectual development, and building rapport with students when teaching online courses. The foundation for the research centered on Bain’s identified set of core characteristics of exemplary college teachers who produce “important educational results” (p. 5). The research suggested best practices may be necessary for good teaching but not sufficient for excellent teaching. The findings concluded an outstanding teacher is not solely so due to implementing best practices but goes beyond technology to foster student engagement, stimulate intellectual development, and build rapport with students. The research emphasized the importance of instructors asking how their choice of teaching approach will impact their relationship and success in developing students into life-long learners. This research is relevant in relation to the faculty presence element being a factor to effectively engage students to optimize learning outcomes.
Dennen, Darabi, and Smith, 2007

Dennen et al. (2007) revealed how communication is viewed differently by instructors and students, with timeliness of instructor feedback essential for student satisfaction. The study included 32 online instructors and 170 students from a large public university and a private online university, who were asked to rate guidelines of the relative perceived importance of 19 online instructor actions rejected by online experts. One aspect of significance resulting from this research is instructors’ belief that student performance is likely connected to instructors providing clearly stated expectations, content and quality feedback. Findings from the student data supported that learner satisfaction is more likely related to students feeling their interpersonal communication needs were being met. The results and findings from this study provide educators with knowledge of communication needs of students and mandates non-reliance on perceived communication needs for faculty and students in online courses. The findings from this research provided insight into differences in perception of effective communication for both faculty and students in the online learning environment.

Yick, Patrick, and Costin, 2005

The qualitative study of Yick, Patrick, and Costin (2005) explored faculty members’ experiences in an online higher education institution. The researchers had 28 faculty participate in an active threaded discussion board which resembled a focus group (Yick et al., 2005). In this particular study, participants were employed at a higher education institution with no traditional tenure system. The study gave voice to faculty members’ experiences and their role within the distance education programs at the university. Themes that emerged after extrapolating the data collected included specific
practices and program and policy recommendations for more effective delivery of online courses. The researchers suggested the institution’s being a for-profit non-traditional tenure track university may be a factor when considering their findings. This study is relevant in terms of specific practices identified from the faculty experience but does not encompass the prevailing importance of faculty presence in the online environment, although the nature of faculty’s role was prevalent in terms of their instructional practices and presence in the online environment.

**Summary**

The expansion of online offerings at four-year state universities grew significantly in the years surrounding the new millennium. Going into the 21st century, online learning is clearly going to be an important part of educational offerings. Research suggests student success rates can be improved with high levels of student engagement motivated through use of technology-mediated communication, online course design and faculty presence (Angelo et al., 2007; Betts, 2009; Dennen et al., 2007). Moreover, just as all three of the streams discussed affect the overall delivery of online instruction, so too do all three of the constituent elements of online courses: pedagogy, technology and faculty presence. In this regard, Koehler et al. (2004) noted, “The incorporation of a new technology or new medium for teaching suddenly forces us to confront basic educational issues since this new technology or medium changes the relationship between all three elements” (p. 27).
Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to study in depth the dynamic of faculty-student relationships in the online learning environment from the lived experience of faculty who teach online courses at California State University of Sacramento. To achieve the stated objectives of this study, the following questions were used to guide the research: a) How do faculty perceive their interactions with students in an online course? b) What instructional practices do faculty believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses? c) Why do faculty members believe the identified instructional practices have positive impacts on student success? The phenomenological research design and questions were utilized in exploring faculty experiences teaching courses online to identify instructional practices viewed as impacting online engagement and student success. The different experiences and general perceptions of individual faculty were examined to identify what is “real” and what may be “ideal” with instructional practices important to success of students’ levels of engagement and assimilation of course content.

The purpose of studying the faculty-student relationship dynamic was to better understand how these experiences impact instructional practices and mental models, and identify ways faculty and institutions can provide effective instructional practices in online courses for better student learning outcomes. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty participants from the identified subject areas who had experience teaching both online and face-to-face courses. The interview was
structured in an open-ended format to explore the interviewee’s perceptions of the faculty-student relationship dynamic existent when teaching online courses. The process allowed the researcher to delve deeply into relationships between faculty and students engaged in the online learning environment. An analysis of artifacts was also key in this research approach, allowing for an in-depth understanding of course content and themes as related to student engagement. The approach allows for flexibility and opportunity for the researcher to ask follow-up questions.

The California State University, Sacramento Office of Institutional Research (OIR; 2011) noted two subject areas to be selected in which online success rates appear quite disparate from those of face-to-face courses. The course offerings were limited in several subject areas, such as English, offering one online course in 2011, and mathematics, offering none. Two subject areas, such as criminal justice and accounting, were chosen from which two faculty can be interviewed. A third subject area, business (introductory level), was noted as having online success rates, which met or exceeded those of students in the face-to-face courses. Therefore, faculty from three subject areas at California State University, Sacramento, were interviewed to provide a better and broader understanding of data gathered from faculty teaching online courses. To ensure credibility of the findings, interviews, recorded field notes and observations, and review of artifacts were completed.

This chapter provides pertinent information regarding the site of the study and description of the population, along with considerations concerning access to the site. The research design and rationale are introduced with a description of methods used to
collect and analyze data following. A discussion of ethical considerations for this study concludes the chapter.

**Site and Population**

**Population Description**

The participants in this study were university faculty who taught online courses in the undergraduate program at California State University, Sacramento, one of 23 universities in the CSU system. The range of online teaching experience for participants varied; however, all participants had taught both online and face-to-face courses in the subject area at the institution for at least two semesters. In terms of the population size of participants, at least two faculty meeting these criteria were interviewed from each subject area chosen, for a minimum of six participants. The criteria for participation ensured participants had some level of experience teaching both online and face-to-face courses. Participants who met criteria identified had exposure to demographics of the existing student body on campus that provided them a foundation on which to discuss their teaching experiences with both online and face-to-face courses.

The data available describing the population for this study are included in general demographic data for faculty employed at Sacramento State. In 2011, there were 1,407 faculty employed at CSU, Sacramento. There is a disparity among ethnicities with a reported 1,005 (73%) Caucasian, 164 (11.7%) Asian Pacific Islander, 95 (6.8%) Latino, 61 (4.3%) African American, 12 (0.9%) American Indian, 8 (0.6%) multiracial, and 62 (4.4%) other or unreported. In terms of gender for faculty, 693 (49.3%) were female and 714 (50.7%) male. The data provided show the vast majority of faculty is of Caucasian descent. The ranking of faculty was also included in the data report with 342 (24.3%)
Full Professors, 209 (14.9%) Associate Professors, 122 (8.7%) Assistant Professors, 654 (46.5%) Lecturers, and 80 (5.7%) employed in other teaching positions. Tenure status was reported to be a total of 582 (41.4%), while on tenure track was 121 (8.6%), and non-tenure track was 704 (50.0%). Faculty employed full-time totaled 698 (49.6%), while part-time faculty totaled 709 (50.4%). The institution only counted each faculty once who had more than one assignment to avoid duplicating headcounts (California State University, Sacramento, 2012)

Site Description

The study was conducted using faculty participants from California State University, Sacramento, a public four-year university located on an urban campus near the downtown area of Sacramento, California. The university is one of 23 that compose the CSU system in California serving California’s greater capital region.

In the CSU system in California there are almost 412,000 students, and 43,000 faculty and staff, the largest, most diverse, and one of the most affordable university systems in the country. CSUs offer unlimited opportunities, including online courses, to help students achieve their goals. The universities also prepare graduates who go on to make a difference in the workforce. CSU universities engage in research and creative activities leading to scientific, technical, artistic, and social advances. The CSU system plays a vital role in the growth and development of California's communities and economy (California State University, 2011).

CSU, Sacramento (CSUS) has a diverse student body of over 28,000 and a highly knowledgeable faculty, with 98% of full-time professors holding the highest degree in their field. Each year, the seven colleges award nearly 6,000 degrees to students, who
pick from 58 undergraduate majors and 41 graduate degree programs, six post-
baccalaureate certificates and two doctoral degrees (California State University,
Sacramento, 2011)

CSUS has utilized proven and emerging technologies for over 25 years to offer
university courses and programs to learners located outside the university boundaries.
The course offerings have been expanded in recent years to facilitate time- and space-
independent learning options. The eLearning Program at CSUS includes those courses in
which a significant portion of instruction takes place when the professor and students are
not in the same place at the same time. The eLearning models and delivery methods
include hybrid, online, televised, and video streaming courses. Several courses utilize a
combination of these methods. The program follows the guidelines described in the
eLearning Policy (Academic Technology and Creative Services, 2011). The eLearning
Program shifted from utilizing WebCT online learning management system to
Blackboard online learning management system in Fall 2011. The university viewed this
as a move to increase opportunities for students, as well as a professional development
opportunity for faculty (Academic Technology and Creative Services, 2011).

The campus is comprised of a diverse student body reported in October 2011 to
total 28,016. For the purpose of reporting, racial/ethnic categories were identified along
with gender and level of study, and graduate or undergraduate status. The CSUS Student
Body report for October 2011 cited 42% Caucasian students, 21% Pacific Islander, 18%
Latino, 12% other, 6% African American, 2% foreign, and 1% American Indian. In the
graduate program there were 68% women, 32% men, while the undergraduate program
had 57% women and 43% men. The percentages are relatively closer within the
undergraduate program; however, the percentage of women in graduate school at CSUS is significantly higher. The age ranges are also statistically significant for undergraduate students. Not surprisingly, 77% of undergraduate students were between the ages of 18 and 24. There was only 3% of the undergraduate population age 40 and above. The data percentages for graduate students were relatively close, with 23% being between the ages of 18 and 24 and 17% aged 40 and above.

The university began offering online courses over 25 years ago, with course offerings and enrollments growing steadily over time. In recent years, there has been a higher demand for online courses to accommodate the needs of students who require more flexible learning opportunities. There are still limited online course offerings in certain subject areas within the institution with English offering one course in the fall of 2011 and no online courses offered in mathematics. With the growing demand for new online learning opportunities and CSU growth within all its higher education institutions, more courses will be offered with distance education to accommodate the progressive movement.

**Site Access**

The researcher is currently in a position as a Project Coordinator in the Division of Social Work at CSUS. The position allowed the researcher to have relatively widespread access to several key areas in the research, including faculty, distance learning program, learning management systems, training and professional development activities, and institutional data. Due to faculty being human subjects, institutional research board (IRB) approval was sought and granted from both the institution sponsoring the research (Drexel University) and the subject institution (CSUS). Drexel
and CSUS universities have their own institutional research boards and approval processes. This process and Ethical Considerations are addressed later in this chapter.

The only barrier impacting site access was availability of participants for individual interviews due to academic work schedules and the timeframe designated to conduct interviews. Conflicts occurred with scheduling interviews, and options had to be considered, such as arranging to meet during weekends or summer months. There were no other significant barriers to site access.

**Research Design and Rationale**

Effective qualitative methods enabled the researcher to explore in depth participants’ personal perceptions and views of instructional practice, determine the social structure and context of the online course design, and put information into a holistic, all-encompassing, phenomenological picture. A qualitative approach was applicable for this study because of the need for the researcher to be immersed in the research and develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the phenomenon was the faculty-student dynamic, which is explored in depth using an inductive process of inquiry (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). It is the work of the phenomenologist to understand life experiences of faculty teaching online courses and give them meaning, usually done by systematically collecting and analyzing narrative materials using methods to ensure credibility of both data and results. This researcher examined her own faculty experiences in the field of online education to identify any bias or assumptions that may have existed to ensure objectivity when conducting the research. The process, referred to as “bracketing,” was introduced by Edmond Husserl (as cited in
Creswell, 2007) and allowed this researcher to delve into exploring the phenomenon from the view of the participants without pre-existing perceptions impacting her objectivity.

In this particular research, the phenomenological approach outlined in the work of Moustakes (1994) was used, which sought to understand phenomenon in a systematic way in the data analysis and procedure (Creswell, 2007). The approach also provided guidelines for assembling textual and structural data collected on faculty perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about instructional practices within the faculty-student dynamic, in a context-specific setting: online courses. It was important to use the qualitative approach to probe in depth into issues that may not have been accessible through quantitative methodology. An example in this research was interviewing participants with open-ended questions to collect data.

For the purpose of this study design, semi-structured interviews were conducted, with open-ended questions to explore the interviewees’ perceptions of the faculty-student relationship dynamic. The process allowed the researcher to delve in depth into relationships between instructors and students in the online learning environment from the faculty perspective. An analysis of artifacts was also key in this research approach, allowing for an in-depth understanding of course content and ability to identify emergent themes as they relate to the dynamic. The approach also allowed for flexibility and opportunity for the researcher to ask follow-up questions. Qualitative data gathered through interviews, artifact reviews, and field notes with observations, were analyzed and coded into themes that allowed the researcher to draw conclusions regarding the phenomenon. The research design made it incumbent upon this researcher to seek a
method that fit with the philosophy and methodology of the research questions. The design and method chosen were congruent with this research in relation both to research questions and assumptions.

**Research Methods**

**Introduction – List of Methods Used**

Research methods utilized for data collection as part of this phenomenological research study included: a) semi-structured interviews with participants; b) artifact review; and c) field notes, to include observation logs.

**Stages of Data Collection**

Data collection progressed in stages after obtaining approvals from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Drexel University and CSUS. Once IRB approvals from each institution were granted, faculty participants within CSUS were recruited for this study. Since the researcher is employed at the university at which the research was undertaken, steps were taken to avoid selecting participants with whom she had a pre-existing connection or familiarity. After faculty participants were identified, interviews were scheduled with each individual.

The interviews explored faculty perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about the faculty-student dynamic regarding online courses, instructional practices, and impact of interactions for student success. The researcher also explored, through the interview process, any artifacts or documents available, such as course syllabi, websites, or PowerPoints. Throughout the interviews, field notes were written to include observations of participants as well as data collected. The interview itself was interpreted in the literal context, although it is important to note consideration was given to non-verbal cues.
observed throughout the interview. All interviews were transcribed and, upon review, significant statements or interesting facts mentioned regarding the faculty-student relationship dynamic were recorded systematically to allow for emergent themes to be developed. Emerging themes were coded with categories created, as well as subcategories under each main theme. The coding process drove interpretation and findings for this study.

Once emergent themes had evolved, textual descriptions were written outlining experiences faculty revealed in teaching online courses. Next, the structural focus for the interviews was extrapolated; explaining how the experiences faculty revealed provided context to what was described in the textual descriptions. The final step in collection of the data was bringing everything together into a composite description (Moustakas as cited in Creswell, 2007). The process culminated in a composite description in the context of the faculty-student relationship dynamic in the online learning environment. This was the concluding step of the data analysis.

**Description of Methods Used**

The following instruments, procedure for inviting and selecting participants, and collecting and analyzing data, were used in this phenomenological qualitative study.

**Instruments utilized.**

**Interview protocol.** Interviews were conducted face-to-face with individual participants. An Interview Protocol (IP) form was created and used with questions to be asked of the interviewee. The form solicited demographic data, time of the interview, location of the interview, views of the interviewee, and provided an area to record field notes during the interview. The Interview Protocol forms were contained within the
codebook for each participant, for confidentiality. Questions contained in the interview protocol were used as the basis for the semi-structured interview (see Appendix A).

**Observation protocol and field notes.** An observation protocol form was developed for the purpose of documenting observations during the face-to-face interview. The researcher noted both environmental factors and behaviors (non-verbal) during the interview. Notations were made during the course of the actual interviews. After the commencement of the interview, notes were added to the form after some reflection to provide additional information to the context of the interview (see Appendix B). Data gathered through field research were maintained in notes by the researcher.

**Artifact review protocol.** Artifacts were reviewed relating to the participant interviewed and learning environment at the research site. The course syllabus and related articles required for the course and online learning, along with references to artifacts participants relayed during the course of interviews, were examined. The artifacts were analyzed to identify emergent themes systematically categorized through a coding process. The researcher ensured appropriate permissions were granted for reviewing relevant artifacts. The artifacts and notes from the analysis were contained in the codebook for each participant interviewed, and stored for future and comparative purposes using the Artifact Review Protocol (see Appendix C).

**Participant selection.** This study required the participation of at least one faculty from at least three different academic disciplines, for a minimum of six total participants. Participants must have taught at least two semesters of online courses with additional
experience teaching face-to-face courses. University course schedules were analyzed to identify a pool of potential participants from each discipline who meet the criteria.

**Identification and invitation.** Participants who met the criteria for this study were provided with the *Invitation to Participate in a Qualitative Research Study About Online Education* notice sent by electronic mail (see Appendix D). The communication included information of procedural safeguards. The invitation also stated participation was voluntary and they had the option of discontinuing at any time. Confidentiality issues were also outlined, together with a reasonable timeframe needed for response. In some cases, follow-up contact was attempted via telephone or in person to secure participants for the study, due to the timeframe of the data collection conflicting with schedules of faculty who may not have been present during the summer months. Where more than two faculty from a subject area agreed to participate in the study, random selection of participants was utilized.

**Data collection.** Field research conducted involved collecting data from various sources, artifacts, and interview of a faculty who taught online courses. The interview of the faculty members provided information about his perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs regarding the faculty-student relationship dynamic in online learning. The interview provided data about instructional practices used in teaching online courses. Faculty perspectives were explored both through a review of the artifacts and interview of a faculty member. Both methods provided rich data regarding faculty perspectives on teaching online courses and discovered which instructional methods were utilized by different participants. Interviews were scheduled for a maximum one-hour timeframe. During the interview, both the interview and protocol forms were used to document
responses of interviewees, note observations of non-verbal behavioral cues, and for writing field notes on environmental observations. The researcher also followed up on soliciting access to artifacts mentioned during the course of interviews. The observation protocol and field notes were retained as part of the codebook for future and comparative use in research.

Data analysis. Data analysis involved transcription of each interview reviewed and coding to discover emerging themes. Categories were created through the coding, with subcategories under each emergent theme. The interview itself was interpreted in the literal context, although it is important to note consideration is given to non-verbal cues observed throughout the interview. Another aspect of the analysis phase involved filtering responses of interviewees through an understanding of existing mental models as participants presented their views of teaching in the online learning environment. Interpretations within constructivist paradigms are presented for the fieldwork conducted.

Field notes written on the Interview Protocol and Observation Protocol forms were examined. Along with the aforementioned data analyzed, artifacts including the course syllabus, websites, and other relevant material identified were reviewed to discover emerging or non-emergent themes. A comparison was made between the analysis from the interview and artifacts to determine thematic similarities or differences that may exist. After this process was completed, one primary coding theme was developed for each category. The outcome from the analysis provided data of effective interactions as well as challenges faculty may encounter when teaching in the online learning environment. Findings from the outcome of the analysis were presented with
recommendations for further study of the faculty-student relationship dynamic in relation to student success in online courses.

**Ethical Considerations**

The process of undergoing the Institutional Review Board process both at Drexel University and CSUS was taken on to ensure appropriate study protocol. Approval through the Internal Review Board was required from both the sponsoring institution and the site where the research was conducted. Each institution has their own board and process requiring compliance through specific guidelines. The researcher also ensured ethical compliance by having the Institutional Review Board validate the study design. Adequate records and process for the study will be provided to the IRB committee.

A significant ethical consideration involved assuring all faculty participants their identifying information would be kept confidential. The researcher took every precaution and step to keep all faculty participants’ identities confidential. Steps were taken to aggregate data and themes to keep confidentiality of participants, since they came from three distinct subject areas. The researcher’s role and employment within the site for the study was disclosed in the initial phase so faculty was aware the role was separate from the researcher’s primary role at the institution.

The researcher conveyed to participants that the results, findings, and recommendations from the study would be revealed and used for future research or planning for faculty who teach online courses. The researcher had an obligation to inform all participants since it is an action research study aimed at improving instructional practices in online education and may be utilized within the site the study is
conducted. Participants had to be informed the data could be used for future research and findings would be published.
Chapter 4: Findings, Results, and Interpretations

Findings

This phenomenological study explored the dynamic of faculty-student relationships in the online learning environment. Within the confines of the study, the faculty-student relationship was defined as the phenomenon occurring when faculty interact with students through various methods in an online learning environment. Student success in the online learning environment was perceived to be positively impacted by enhancement of faculty, student, and institutional engagement through technology-mediated communication, course design, and faculty presence.

To explore this hypothesis, qualitative data were obtained in semi-structured interviews of six faculty members currently teaching at California State University, Sacramento. Through these interviews, instructors provided detailed accounts of their perspectives regarding instructional practices used in teaching online courses, as well as their attitudes and beliefs regarding the faculty-student relationship dynamic in online learning. Interviews were structured and designed to incorporate the three research questions guiding the present study: a) How do faculty perceive their interactions with students in an online course? b) What instructional practices do faculty believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses? c) Why do faculty members believe that the identified instructional practices have positive impacts on student success? The interviewees, referred to by pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, represent diverse disciplines and different levels of training and experience (see Table 1). The following data analysis of the interview transcripts reveals faculty perspectives on technology-
mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence.

Significant statements or interesting facts about the faculty-student relationship dynamic were recorded systematically to allow for the development of emergent themes. After these findings are presented, the remainder of the chapter provides a composite description of the findings in the context of the scholarly literature. These results, in turn, are placed in an interpretive framework.

Table 1

*Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Online Education Training</th>
<th>Years Teaching Online (approx.)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
<td>1 online course; self-taught</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradley</td>
<td>College of Natural Sciences</td>
<td>Self-taught</td>
<td>&lt; 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montgomery</td>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>Courses offered by SacCT IT services; Publishers Site</td>
<td>4–5 (+ 4 yrs. distance ed.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
<td>Health and Human Services</td>
<td>E-learning course through university; workshops on campus</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connelly</td>
<td>College of Social Science and Interdisciplinary Studies</td>
<td>Workshops on campus; Tutorials</td>
<td>1 (+7 yrs. distance ed.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry</td>
<td>College of Arts and Letters</td>
<td>Training, workshop Self Taught</td>
<td>5 (+5 yrs. distance ed.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Online Course Design Faculty Perspectives: Themes

**Instructor workload.** A primary concern for interviewees related to online course design was instructor workload. For two instructors, the online format enabled greater efficiency. Montgomery remarked:

I can get more accomplished online. Because if I’m spending time doing research, every course, I can usually find some little things that I’ve not used in a previous course which are useful, which I can embed in the course, and also make that available to them. I can provide students with link to everything that I do online.

Connelly stated: “The online format, depending on who you are and what you like to do in terms of teaching, it can be very convenient; it’s a big time saver.” The ability to work on the course anytime was cited as another major advantage of the online format; according to Connelly, “I do it when I’m on vacation or whatever. That’s probably the most convenient thing of all, is that it’s all online based. I don’t need my PC. All I need is an Internet connection.”

However, two instructors reported the opposite, that online teaching is much more time-consuming for the instructor. Clay noted, “It’s tougher to teach, it’s harder to do it, and it’s far more time consuming than if you actually showed up to class and did the lecture.” Bradley stated that one of the most significant challenges of teaching an online course is managing this huge amount of students and email online, since I have 80 students. They may be doing 80 students because that’s how many I have in a face-to-face, but it’s ridiculous because it’s much more work online. Much more.

All interviewees indicated that online courses require constant attention on the part of the instructor. Connelly stated, “I’m trying to discipline myself to be on it every day.” Another instructor, Dana, reported that the online format had been relatively time-
consuming to learn, as special training opportunities were not yet available: “I just had to get in there and figure things out.”

**Class size.** Concern about class size was a recurrent theme in the responses. Again, the interviewees were divided. Some instructors, like Montgomery, welcomed enrollees: “I’ve got like a 60-student cap on the roster, but I’ve also got 11 students trying to add. But I’m hoping I can add them, because it’s all online.” Connelly, who was teaching two sections of the same course, appreciated the time efficiency made possible by a single taped lecture distributable to both sections:

> This semester, I think I’ve got 130 registered across two sections. Now, if I were teaching that in a traditional course format, forget it. That would be a pain in the ass, to say the least. But no. Online, it’s great. I’m happy, they’re happy.

Further, for instructors such as Connelly, whose salary is dependent on the number of sections taught, this efficiency translates into higher pay for the same amount of work.

Conversely, others expressed concern about the tendency of online courses to become overly large. Clay expressed frustration with administrators, claiming they wrongly assume class sizes online should equal (or exceed) traditional course enrollments: “The assumption that if I teach 45 students in a sit-down class, that you can do the same thing online is just false, but the universities operate on numbers these days.” Another instructor noted that as the size of the class increased, it became more difficult, and eventually impossible, to provide feedback to the students. As a solution, Montgomery suggested dividing very large classes into smaller groups, to simulate small class sizes for online discussions and collaborative exercises (Montgomery).

**Transitioning from traditional to online classroom.** Several interviewees developed online courses from courses they had previously taught in traditional
classrooms. Translating the class into another format involved incredible effort for instructors, even (or perhaps, especially) when instructional practices were taken directly from classroom-based course design. All interviewees except Shelby described lecturing in their online courses. Some provided lectures to students in written form. Connelly, for example, described writing out lectures to upload as PDFs for his online students. “A fully online course, the most significant challenge was writing the lectures… And if you’re writing an 8-10 page lecture for each module…there’s a steep amount of work to do right out of the gate.” Clay described a similar process:

The first time I ever taught a(n online) class, I ended up taking those PowerPoint lectures…and fleshing them out. And so I would end up writing 10–15 page lectures by the time all was said and done, because you have to type all that stuff in there.

By contrast, Bradley and Montgomery both recorded video lectures. This approach seemed less stressful and time-consuming than that employed by Connelly and Clay. In addition, Montgomery was able to supplement lectures with materials provided by the textbook publisher:

I’ve got this set of narrated slides in the [Connect] Accounting environment that they can also use. That’s kind of a nice feature. A lot of students like to listen to the explanation for the chapter content without actually doing anything; just sit back and listen. The publishers provide much better than me.

Adding improvements after translating the course into online format was reported to improve the instructors’ experience. For example, Dana noted a new version of Blackboard substantially improved the transition to and functioning of online classes.

**Student engagement.** In addition to concerns about effort expended on course preparation, interviewees discussed maximizing student engagement with the course as well as encouraging students to interact with one another. In some cases, this concern
with maximizing student interaction stemmed from the instructors’ sense that the online format is inherently weak in this regard. According to Connelly, “The level of interactivity is much reduced online.” Bradley stated, “You build a relationship with your face-to-face students that you don’t build with most of them online.” On the other hand, Shelby asserted that the round-the-clock accessibility of online courses led to greater interactivity:

Using online modality enhances significantly the level of communication with students, because you can reinforce through different means, and students can access the information at any time. It doesn’t have to be like class time alone that they have to be there.

Dana added, “I think I’ve experienced pretty high engagement from the majority of students or at least students motivated to do well and learn.”

A few of the interviewed instructors – Bradley, Connelly, and Shelby – relied largely on discussion forums to encourage interaction among and with students. Bradley noted, “I hate to lecture. I like to have a discussion in class. So I was trying to do the same thing online, have discussion forums going.” By contrast, Montgomery rejected the use of discussion forums as unsuitable for a course with 300 students. Furthermore, Clay reported that the quality of engagement on discussion boards has declined over the years: “I get discussion board stuff now that looks like they were typing text messages on their cells. They’re not fully constructed sentences. They’re brief pieces of stuff. Yeah, it’s pretty weird.”

Discussion boards and other similar features to increase student engagement greatly impact instructor workloads. The monitoring of discussion boards to assess
quality and quantity of student posts “eats up a lot of time,” according to Clay.

Connelly explained:

I would say I’m troubleshooting at least a couple of times a day or more during a course. And then I just go online and check and make sure… I also want to make sure that everybody is submitting. And if people aren’t submitting, then I have to send reminder emails and all that kind of thing.

**Fostering motivation in the online classroom.** Most of the interviewees assumed student engagement was largely a function of students’ motivation levels. Moreover, they often perceived motivation to be outside the instructor’s control. All remarked, in one way or another, that the characteristics students brought to the course – such as their major, reason for taking the course, maturity level, attitude, and readiness for college-level work – were more likely to determine their level of motivation than interventions by the instructor:

Bradley: I find that my online students are more mature, and more advanced in getting their degrees. So usually they write better, and they are more likely to be able to keep a schedule without missing due dates.

Shelby: [For a] lot of students, especially going from community college where they’re used to getting everything spoon fed… the challenge will be independence, initiative, and readiness.

Clay: When I teach those degree completion classes, they’re engaged. Those students are older, they’ve already got work, they know why they’re getting the degree, because it’s what they want to do. And they are motivated, and they pay a lot of money because continuing education is self-supported.

Connelly: The difference isn’t really between online versus traditional. The difference is between what are the students. The students in my online courses are all general ed students. They’re not majors or grad students in Anthropology, so that I think is a central difference right there.

Dana: If they are motivated and want to succeed they will do it. In some cases technology may be an issue but realistically when you sign up for an online course there is an assumption the student has access to technology.
Montgomery: I think those that come in with the right attitude are quite happy with the way the environment is structured. Moreover, some of the interviewees were unconvinced that working to increase student motivation was part of their role as instructor: “The motivation should come from within,” noted Shelby, and Connelly stated, “I don’t do handholding.”

Nevertheless, the same instructors offered examples of instructional practices they had employed to motivate students, such as “mak[ing] things interesting and exciting and engaging” (Shelby), “making study aids and supplementary materials available online” (Shelby), “being flexible about due dates” (Connelly), and “being inflexible about due dates” (Connelly). Mandatory discussion board posts were mentioned by two interviewees (Connelly, Clay) as strategies for keeping students engaged with their courses. Connelly noted, “Having a weekly or bi-monthly discussion post that’s due keeps them … you know, they’ve got to get on that. They can’t just let it slip to the end of the semester.”

**Tracking student activity in the online environment.** Attitudes were mixed over use of tracking tools to assess student engagement. While instructors were intrigued by the ability to monitor and measure student activity online, most seemed unsure what to do with the information.

One of the nice things about the publisher’s environment is I can look at what every student is doing and how much they’re doing…. Not that I can necessarily change their motivation or whatever. But certainly I can identify those students who are having problems. (Montgomery)

Some instructors, such as Clay, contacted students whose online “footprint” was minimal or intermittent: “When I see holes, then I’ll go back to that student and see what’s going on. And then I can go back into the grade book and my notes and that kind of thing, the
tracking. But again, it’s really time-consuming.” Finally, some instructors saw student activity reports as potentially revelatory of student deception. Connelly described the following hypothetical situation:

I see that somebody is asking me for a favor like, “I blew off this assignment, and I need … My grandma was in the hospital, and I need a day…” So then I would go and, “I see you began that assignment half an hour before it was due. But you started it, and yet you’re claiming that your grandma… That’s awfully convenient that your grandmother got sick and went to the hospital just in that half-hour period.”

In short, the interviewees’ use of technology to track student activity remained rather simplistic, and some saw tracking as essentially a waste of time. Connelly continued,

Usually I don’t have the energy for that kind of thing…the volume of stats and all that kind of thing is not something that I think I would obsess over. I don’t think many faculty… Maybe the number crunchers, the quantitatively oriented, but not me.

Dana did not find tracking useful either: when asked whether activity statistics from the learning management system were used, Dana replied:

Not really, but it does show who logged in and when they last logged in, and this is helpful. I find the students who want to be successful in the class will be successful and are motivated to contact me if needed.

Again, motivation was presented as the factor behind the success of a student in the online classroom.

**Technology-mediated Communication: Obstacles**

**Access to technology.** Several interviewees reported student access to computers, software, and other technology as an obstacle to successful faculty-student interaction. This problem is two-fold. First, students must be able to access computers that run the appropriate software. “If they don’t have adequate software set up and they don’t have it set up properly, then they’re going to have problems” (Montgomery).
Second, they must be comfortable using the technology. “If they do not know how to troubleshoot problems themselves, they must know where to seek help” (Montgomery).

Computer literacy. Inadequate computer literacy places a strain on student-faculty relationships, particularly when panicked students contact busy instructors about technical problems. Connelly remarked:

It is a pain in the ass, with students that have technology problems, “Professor XXX, My server went down!” You know what? Use your brain, and figure that out before you take the course, not during, because I have no sympathy. Or at least I have a very small amount of sympathy.

An instructor’s lack of technological savvy is potentially problematic as well, limiting the possible applications of the online platform. Some instructors’ reliance on discussion forums above all other methods seemed to stem from timidity about other technological applications. Connelly reported:

I haven’t explored too many of the options for student interactivity among themselves other than [discussion boards]. I know there are other possibilities, and eventually I will do that. But I’ve been very concerned to make sure I kept things very…You know, the technology has a tendency to get out of control real quickly, and I just wanted to keep things bare bones so that I could easily control everything. And I didn’t want it to get too complicated.

Others were much more confident about incorporating technology into their course design, for example by encouraging students to make use of online resources.

Montgomery noted:

There’s a lot more resources that students can actually access when you’re online. Whereas in a classroom, you’ve got your talent, basically. Yes, there’s a TV and video that’s available, too. But I think most students…I wouldn’t say they’re all self-directed, but I think a lot of them work quite well and like to be challenged in a self-directed environment. In other words, let them do some research on… For instance, you want to learn more about generally accepted accounting principles, I can just tell you the basic definition, but if you really want to understand it better, then go online. Just do a Google search, and it’s amazing how much you can learn by doing that.
A number of instructors discussed the multimedia possibilities for online courses, although few seemed to be currently using multimedia, e.g., video lectures, successfully. Connelly, one of the relatively inexperienced instructors, expressed the desire to incorporate more multimedia applications in the future:

The tools that are there are, although I haven’t taken full advantage of them yet, are, I have a feeling, really effective ones. There’s all kinds of unexplored territory. … I’m looking at some point at showing film clips and having dialog about film clips, and things like that. I can also insert podcasts and video… All kinds of things are possible that are not possible in traditional classroom instruction.

However, Clay, the instructor with the most online teaching experience, noted the inclusion of such media is often fraught with obstacles due to copyright laws difficult to work around in an online modality:

You really are limited in the amount of media you can use… I can tell them to go read the *New York Times*, I can tell them to go to the library and tell them you want to read something in *The Economist* this week because all of that is available in the library. But when I want to show them a film, you can’t do it. Technically, I can’t do it in a classroom. But the reality is, if I have them in my classroom for an hour and a half and I show them a movie, there’s no… The copyright [XX] not out there, in my classroom. But boy, they’re online.

**Student presence.** Mediated by technology, the online course environment is a vastly different context for student interaction than the traditional classroom. Instructors report complex perceptions of student presence and absence in the online modality. Students may be attracted to online courses because of the social distance compared with face-to-face classrooms. Bradley observed it was difficult to get students to meet with others, even online, to complete group projects:

The students absolutely hated that because they were doing an online class because they didn’t want to have to find times to meet with others. So asynchronous work, such as commenting on discussions, they were fine with. But having them work in groups to write something, they did not like that.
In certain disciplines, this reluctance to interact may be especially problematic.

According to Shelby:

Coming together doesn’t have to be face-to-face. But some concepts definitely require group effort. It does require the student to demonstrate interpersonal skills. And... some students kind of think of online as an opportunity to get away from other people.

In contradistinction, other instructors believed the online environment made students more visible than the traditional classroom because, as Clay noted, “it doesn’t allow them to hide.” Bradley reported, somewhat counter-intuitively, discussion forums can allow instructors to get to know their students better than they would be able to in person: “I really like that I was able to hear from all my students; the shy ones, the not shy ones, because they’re writing, so I get to know a different part of them that I don’t in the face-to-face.”

Anonymity. One form of interactivity possible in the online environment is anonymous discussion, which may give shyer students the courage to express themselves in ways that would be difficult for them in a traditional classroom. According to Shelby, Let’s say we’re having a discussion, an online discussion, and a student can post without the other students knowing who is doing the posting. Not only can they get feedback from me, but they can get feedback from their colleagues, and just get a sense if they’re on track without any giveaway as to who it is that doesn’t know.

This combination of distance and freedom of expression, may lead to unfortunate scenarios, as in the case of a student who disrespected a classmate’s religious beliefs in an online discussion in one of Connelly’s classes: “The student...would not have dared to do that in a classroom situation. The fact that she did online is typical of the online
environment. People feel uninhibited in terms of going out there with their points of view.”

**Cheating.** The problem of cheating made possible by asynchronous testing methods was brought up by four of the six interviewees (Montgomery, Shelby, Clay, Bradley). All four employed methods such as giving the students algorithmic problems, “which means that every student is going to get the same question, but with different numbers” (Montgomery), or generating tests randomly from larger question pools in order to create non-identical examinations (Shelby, Clay, Bradley). Another anti-cheating measure mentioned by Shelby was the use of lock-down browsers. Shelby also expressed the concern that working on assignments online might encourage students to cheat using unauthorized online resources, “because again, you’re talking about internet and online thing. A lot of people might just try and access information… not even doing the work that they should.”

**Elements to Promote Online Faculty Presence**

**Availability.** Most interviewees placed great importance on making themselves present and available to students. There was a broad consensus that, even more than in a traditional classroom course, instructors should be easily reachable by email: Montgomery stated, “I’m available 24/7 on email basis. Not that I’m necessarily going to reply right away, but I’m still there if they need it.” However, the expectation of round-the-clock communication can be abused by students, reported Clay. “I literally had one student say, ‘He doesn’t respond. I sent him a message on SacCT, and he hadn’t gotten back to me in half an hour.’”
**Video lectures.** The use of video lectures was cited by one interviewee as an effective way for students to get to know their instructors more personally. “I also do not just videos about the content. Sometimes I will do something… ‘Oh, I hope you’re having a good week… Remember that I’m a real person right here. Come meet[?] with me.’” Of all the interviewees, Bradley was the most proactive user of multimedia to increase instructor presence: “I made a series of short lectures on the things students have most difficulty with, and I post them on YouTube.” Although such measures have significant effect in personalizing the course, faculty-student communication of this nature can be one-sided, as students are able to recognize their instructors in person but not the other way around. Bradley noted, “It’s kind of cute, but sometimes I’m looking around, and I don’t know who they are, and they’re like, ‘You’re my professor.’”

Connelly found online education in many ways a poor substitute for face-to-face interaction:

I consider teaching a performance art. And I’m pretty good at it in my own way. But I can’t do it in an online course, fully online… When I’m in front of an upper-division class, I’m on for 45 minutes, and it becomes real dialectic. I give to the students, they give back to me… I’m probably more effective in front of a live group of people.

Connelly described exploiting electronic communications as much as possible to compensate for the distance created in an online environment:

One of the things I try to do is I try to make personalized emails and send them out to everyone. I communicate with those classes as a group at least once a week. So I try to put a face on me for them, just so I wasn’t completely anonymous.

**Ongoing communication of expectations.** Most instructors considered their communication of expectations for students in an online course to be relatively
unproblematic. Just as in a traditional classroom, instructors reported laying out requirements and due dates in the syllabus at the start of the course. According to Clay, “‘you’ve got to do this, you’ve got to do that. Exams will be held at…’ you know. It’s pretty much like any other syllabus.” However, there was some agreement that online courses required more clarity about expectations than traditional courses. Connelly noted,

The thing about the online course is that unless you’re paying attention, unless you’re really on it, you can let all your work slip right [laughs]. So I have to be really clear up front about, “You have between this date and this date to accomplish this. Then, you have between this date and this date to accomplish this.”

There was little discussion on the part of the interviewees about making sure the students were prepared for what the online modality would entail. “It is important to establish the nature of work, and also to discourage students who aren’t prepared for that kind of modality from choosing it.”

**Results and Interpretations**

While the interviewees’ perceptions and attitudes concerning faculty-student relationship dynamics in online courses were very diverse, certain trends do emerge from the data. These are described in detail below and summarized in Figure 4.
Figure 4. Themes in faculty perceptions and attitudes related to faculty-student relationship dynamics.

Diversity of Online Courses

There are marked differences among disciplines; observed, for example, in the ability of instructors from different fields to accommodate large online class sizes. In general, the range of instructor responses indicates online course design must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, taking into account factors such as discipline, pedagogical objectives, instructor training, and student preparation.
Balancing Instructor Workload Efficiency and Effective Student Engagement

There is notable tension between instructor workload and the need to maximize student engagement. Interviewees recounted their use of various strategies to maximize engagement. While some of these are particular to the online modality (e.g. wikis, linking to online resources, and promoting the use), others are taken directly from traditional classroom teaching methodology. Johnson and Aragon (2003), by contrast, found that moving away from recorded lectures, readings, and tests toward a more interactive learning environment, e.g. utilizing a virtual team, games, or case studies, is a more effective way of increasing student engagement. These researchers also recommended moving away from modeling online courses after traditional ones.

Broad Technological Solutions

While there may be a steep learning curve for instructors when developing new instructional practices for online settings, choosing practices that require less monitoring (as opposed to discussion forums) and allow for automated forms of assessment may help instructors use their time more efficiently. This is facilitated by advancements in technology that enhance instructors’ ability to analyze metadata surrounding student interactions in the online learning environment. However, Arnold (2007) found faculty used the tools at rudimentary levels, which is in keeping with the experiences of several of the interviewees, who evinced a certain timidity about experimenting with technologically based instructional practices and assessment tools. Nonetheless, such tools may not be applicable to all disciplines. Multiple-choice tests that can be graded automatically and electronically may be a good fit for some fields, but not others.
Subjectivity of Student Motivation

Numerous studies have indicated that increased interaction among students, and between students and faculty, is essential to creating a true learning community and optimal learning outcomes (Angelino et al., 2007; Daymont et al., 2011; Lear et al., 2010). Interviewees’ central concerns when discussing course design were consistent with this literature and overwhelmingly related to maximizing student engagement with the course and encouraging students to interact with one another. Most interviewees associated student engagement with their level of motivation; an assumption consistent with the findings of Bennett and Monds (2008). This study indicated that student success is attributable to intrinsic motivation, although motivation could be increased with implementation of certain instructional practices. In the present study, however, the interviewees were ambivalent about their ability to influence student motivation. All remarked that the characteristics students brought to the course were more important than interventions on their part to motivate them. Although some interviewees were unconvinced that working to increase student motivation was part of their role as instructors, the same instructors offered examples of instructional practices they had used to motivate students. While this ambivalence about the role of instructors in fostering student motivation is likely not unique to online educators, it may have more negative consequences for students in online courses. As Angelino et al. (2007) found, attrition rates were cited to be 10–20% higher than in face-to-face courses. These researchers observed that proactive intervention on the part of instructors was the most effective strategy for keeping students engaged.
Communication Through Social Media Applications

The research supports that transactional distance between learner and instructor in a distance learning setting often leads to psychological and communications gaps (Chen et al., 2010; Dziuban et al., 2007). The interviewees were aware of the potential gaps, and most went out of their way to be present and available to students. However, this presence was not always a two-way street, as students were able to recognize their instructors’ faces but not the other way around. Joyce and Brown (2009) found that utilizing tools such as MySpace and Facebook enhanced social presence for students participating in online courses and that instructors may create more dynamic online communities by incorporating social media. Bach et al. (2007) recommended an introductory discussion board where students can post photographs and, based on a series of standard prompts from the moderator, provide some background information concerning their goals in the online learning environment in ways that can serve the same purposes as face-to-face meetings.

Interpretations

Students are becoming increasingly computer literate, and the move to online instruction seems at first glance to be appropriate for students of the digital age. However, in designing successful online courses, closer attention must be paid to the reasons students are attracted to non-traditional learning environments. As suggested by Daymont et al. (2011), online platforms may not be attractive to students in themselves, but rather for the flexibility they afford. This seems consistent with the testimony of the interviewees, who cited students with full-time jobs, students with children, and student athletes as the types of student likely to be attracted to online courses. Although the
recession and larger economic circumstances may create strong motivation to attain
degrees and job qualifications quickly, students are often distracted by a range of outside
responsibilities.

Moreover, students are also distracted in the online environment. Greater
familiarity with computers does not necessarily make students better online learners. As
Clay observed:

I found over the period I was teaching at Sac State, which started in 2001, that
year by year, you can see as [online courses] get more crowded and students get
more and more pushed with all of the other things that they have chosen to drive
into their lives, or it’s driven into their lives, they are less and less engaged. I
don’t have any numbers to verify that, but I do know that I find that the
preparation level of students coming in is not as good as it used to be, or at least
they’re not demonstrating it. I find them kind of frazzled and torn apart. [T]here’s
some stuff being written about this. I haven’t read any of the formal stuff, but
I’ve been picking stuff up in the New York Times and stuff about how tough it is
to keep people focused for longer periods of time. They’ve got 101 things.

These considerations are essential because student motivation is closely tied to student
engagement and student success. There are many outside factors, from the cultural to the
economic, that can affect students’ choices to take courses online and their level of
engagement in those courses. While these factors are often beyond instructors’ control,
greater awareness of these larger contexts may translate into smarter online course
design. In addition, increased instructor presence and the incorporation of more
interactive components into online courses are likely to contribute to better faculty-
student communication (Angelino et al., 2007)

Many of the strategies on which instructors rely to increase presence and
interactivity result in increased workloads for instructors. It is not just students who are
finding themselves “frazzled and torn apart.” The interviewees took pride in being
available to students but found the volume of email, which is greater in an online
course, difficult to manage. Course designs often drew heavily on traditional classroom
course models; there was a heavy emphasis on lecture and discussion, which sometimes
resulted in new challenges in the online format. Specifically, discussion forums were
reported to be incredibly time-consuming to monitor. There is some evidence that
reliance on discussion forums and lectures is related to a low level of comfort with other
technologies, lack of understanding about their possibilities, and/or bureaucratic obstacles
(e.g., copyright limitations).

Contrary to the findings of Ray (2009), better teacher training in pedagogy and
technology may not be the key to instructor effectiveness in online education. The
interviews reveal a much more complicated relationship between training and success.
Two of the instructors who had received formal training reported it was entirely useless
when designing their own online courses; the bulk of their learning was accomplished on
the job. Montgomery, one of the most enthusiastic proponents of online teaching
interviewed, was highly computer literate, and had pursued several courses in online
teaching offered by the campus IT services. However, Clay, while not formally trained,
was vastly more experienced than any of the other interviewees with online education
and was also the most critical of its usefulness.

Instructors’ levels of comfort running online courses may also be a function of
discipline. Instructors in subject areas like social work and anthropology expressed
misgivings about certain instructional practices typical for online courses: for example,
relying entirely on electronic communication and the use of automated assessment
systems like multiple choice tests. Such instructional practices may be more appropriate
for fields like accounting where interpersonal skills and high-level writing are less important for success. In addition, computer skills are central to accounting, giving the computer-centric format of an online course an inherent pedagogical purpose.

Montgomery noted:

[I] got into the [online] teaching environment … not only for my myself but because the students nowadays, it’s important that they get as much practice as possible using a computer. That especially applies in things like Excel. When students leave here and apply for jobs, they’re expected to know how to construct a spreadsheet using a computer.

Aside from variability between disciplines, the temperament and personal interests of the instructor may also make a difference in enthusiasm about technology-based tools for instruction and assessment. For example, when asked about use of data generated online, such as activity reports to track student progress, Bradley responded in the affirmative, “I’m a scientist. I’m a big believer in measuring things.” By contrast, Connelly answered, “Oh, hell no. Hell no. No, no, no. Life’s too short.” Generational differences may also explain some of the disparities in perception between, for example, Clay (recently retired) and some of the younger interviewees. Personality differences should also not be underestimated. For example, most of the instructors considered it tedious to police student contributions to prevent cheating, but for Shelby, cheating detection was an interesting puzzle. “It’s intriguing, just because of the struggle that’s going on to keep up, to keep ahead, and what people try to do.”

There may be no one-size-fits-all set of guidelines for online instruction, as faculty preference (and tolerance) for different instructional practices vary widely from individual to individual. Encouraging collaboration among faculty, or between faculty and technicians (Koehler et al., 2004), with differing strengths may lead to more effective course design.
Figure 5 summarizes the factors influencing the success of online education courses.

- Both instructor and student literacy are important
- May be unrelated to instructor training
- Instructor temperament, age, and interest may also be factors

- Responsibilities beyond the classroom impact engagement
- Cultural and economic factors and students' motivation

- Some courses, depending on discipline, may be more suited to online teaching
- Must be able to incorporate more interactive technologies (rather than only discussion boards)

- Must balance instructor workload
- Pedagogical techniques must be different from those used in traditional classrooms

**Figure 5.** Factors contributing to the success of online education courses.

**Summary**

The present study provided an in-depth exploration of the perceptions of faculty regarding their interactions with students in online courses. The issues faced by
instructors were elaborated to frame those practices faculty felt had a positive impact upon student success in online courses. Finally, the present study examined faculty perceptions of the efficacy of instructional practices recommended in the online environment. Qualitative data were obtained through interviews to provide answers based on faculty participants’ insider perspectives.

Data analysis of interview transcripts revealed six faculty members’ perspectives on technology-mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence. The interviews revealed diverse experiences and attitudes among the faculty members regarding a number of themes: the efficiency of the online modality; the effects of class size; methods for maximizing student motivation, engagement, and interaction; the tracking of outcomes; computer literacy (of both students and faculty); and the policing of student contributions and cheating.

Student motivation to take online courses as well as their relationship to technology can best be understood in the context of broader cultural and economic change. Instructors associated student motivation with student engagement and student success; however, they were divided about the impact of instructional practices on motivation. Instructors accepted without question that increased interactivity, personalization, and community-building in online courses is crucial to student engagement. This belief is supported by the literature. The most effective strategies for increasing student motivation and engagement were not entirely clear to the interviewees, however, who often relied on traditional methods such as lectures and discussions. Nonetheless, some instructors did report success with tools such as YouTube, wikis, and other technology-enabled assessment tools. Formal training does not seem to be as
critical as one might expect for instructors’ comfort and satisfaction with online education. More important are the appropriateness of their chosen instructional practices for their particular discipline, their perceived levels of student motivation, and their individual attitudes toward technology and technological pedagogical tools. Salient differences among disciplines and between individual instructors indicate universities and colleges should not universally offer online versions of all courses but rather assess the effectiveness of the online modality on a case-by-case basis.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The study presented in this dissertation sought to identify potential solutions to increase student success in online learning through effective methods to enhance the faculty-student dynamic. A phenomenological approach was used to gain insight into faculty assumptions, perspectives, attitudes, and experiences related to online instructional practices in their courses. The study drew upon three areas of theory – technology-mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence – to answer the following three questions:

1. How do instructors of online courses perceive their interactions with students?
2. What instructional practices do these faculty members believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses?
3. Why do faculty members believe the identified instructional practices have a positive impact on student success?

The study was conducted at California State University, Sacramento, a four-year public institution of higher education currently expanding its online instructional offerings. The study was conducted in response to a need to understand effective instructional practices in the CSU’s growing number of online courses. The rapid growth in online education within the CSU system has not allowed research to keep pace with practice. The best teaching practices for the online environment have not been identified, and neither researchers nor faculty fully understand the implications of the faculty-student dynamic in relation to success in online learning. Given such circumstances,
there was a need to conduct an in-depth exploration of faculty-lived experiences teaching online in order to understand current faculty practice and to identify the instructional practices that positively impact student success. The findings of the study provide valuable insight for institutions and faculty teaching online to aid in increasing levels of student engagement and assimilation of course content, essential to successful learning outcomes for students.

This study used a phenomenological qualitative research methodology, consisting of conducting open-ended, face-to-face interviews of six professors from diverse subject areas who have taught undergraduate courses both in an online environment for at least two semesters, and in a traditional brick-and-mortar setting. A qualitative approach was chosen for this study because of the need to examine a phenomenon in an in-depth manner that may not be accessible through quantitative methodology. The phenomenon studied was the faculty-student dynamic. Faculty perceptions and experiences were analyzed using an inductive process of inquiry (Creswell, 2008; Merriam, 2009). The researcher was, and continues to be, employed at the university where the research was conducted, in a position involving collaborating with distance education and developing online courses. In developing the study, the researcher examined her own faculty experiences in the field of online education to identify any bias or assumptions and to ensure objectivity when conducting the research.

In the course of the interviews, the researcher maintained an observation log of field notes and collected course artifacts, such as syllabi, course websites, and PowerPoint presentations. Qualitative data gathered through interviews, artifact reviews, and field notes with observations were coded into themes, which allowed the researcher
to draw conclusions regarding the phenomenon. The interviews focused primarily on faculty experiences of, beliefs about, and attitudes toward the faculty-student dynamic that develops during distance learning. Questions probed three aspects of this dynamic: technology-mediated communication, online course design, and elements of faculty presence. For the purposes of this study, technology-mediated communication encompassed the tools, activities, and interactions that faculty view as a driving force for student engagement. Online course design pertained to factors that should be considered when designing courses for online curricular offerings, including the constraints to promoting faculty-student interaction in online environments. Finally, faculty presence in online courses involved instructional strategies to enhance the instructor’s presence in the online environment, translating virtual activities into impressions of real ones.

An Interview Protocol form (Appendix A) was developed to record each participant’s demographic information, the time and location of the interview, and the views of the faculty being interviewed. The researcher’s observational field notes were recorded on a form in Appendix B. The information recorded using this Interview Protocol form provided the basis for analysis of the face-to-face, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. A separate Observation Protocol form was developed to record environmental and nonverbal observations made during the actual interviews; the form was also used to record notes pertaining to contextual and other information compiled upon post-interview reflection. The different experiences and general perceptions of individual faculty were examined to identify real and ideal instructional practices that best maximize students’ level of engagement and assimilation of course content. Data analysis of the interviews revealed diverse experiences and attitudes among the six
faculty members regarding six different themes related to technology-mediated communication, online course design, and faculty presence: a) the efficiency of the online modality, b) the effects of class size, c) methods for maximizing student motivation, engagement, and interaction, d) the tracking of outcomes, e) computer literacy (of both students and faculty), and f) the policing of student contributions and cheating.

Conclusions

This study sought to understand how the faculty-student dynamic contributes to student success in online courses through an in-depth exploration of faculty perceptions of online learning modalities. Three research questions were developed to guide the present study’s collection of rich, phenomenological data to illuminate the faculty perceptions and practices of online teaching. The answers to these questions led to the conclusions outlined below. These conclusions concern three aspects of online education – technology-mediated communication, online course design, and faculty presence – and form the foundation for the study’s recommendations, given in the following section.

Research Question 1: How do instructors of online courses perceive their interactions with students?

Faculty-student interaction is deemed crucial to student success and positively associated with student engagement, and most faculty make great efforts to make themselves available to students and to promote interaction with and among students. However, perceptions about interaction in the online environment are mixed – characterized as both more efficient and more time-consuming – and depend upon the instructor’s ability to adapt teaching methods to the online environment. Whereas video lectures and interactive tools are viewed as increasing the sense of personal interaction,
online discussion forums, one of the most commonly used methods to encourage interaction, have mixed assessment. On the positive side, they are seen as vehicles for shy students to contribute anonymously that give both faculty and students access and ability to respond to every student’s thoughts; but on the negative side, they are believed to alienate students from one another and not to yield thoughtful replies.

**Research Question 2: What instructional practices do these faculty members believe have a positive impact on student success in their courses?**

Faculty who expanded their repertoire in the online environment to use more interactive tools and instructional practices, rather than mere adaptation of the traditional lecture-and-discussion format, rated their instructional practices favorably. Their ability to employ these technologies appeared to be related to their individual attitudes toward technology and their familiarity with technological pedagogical tools gained not through formal training but through their use on the job and through collaborations with technology specialists to design online courses. Indeed, although views on the necessity for instructor technological literacy were mixed, receptivity to new technologies seemed to be correlated with the highest level of satisfaction and success in online teaching. Faculty overwhelmingly agreed that practices enhancing student motivation and engagement were critical to student success. They attempted to maintain students’ motivation to succeed in their courses by making coursework interesting and exciting; providing various types of supplementary material online; and being either flexible or inflexible about due dates, depending on how they viewed the motivational qualities of either option. Of the varied attempts to increase student engagement, most successful were wikis, videos, and online tools provided by textbook publishers.
Research Question 3: Why do faculty members believe that the identified instructional practices have positive impacts on student success?

Successful instructional practices were believed to enhance student engagement. Their ability to engage students was perceived to be related to the applicability of both the instructional practice and the discipline in question to the online format. Faculty also viewed student motivation as essential to student success, but they largely saw student motivation as beyond the sphere of faculty influence, and some rejected altogether the idea that student motivation should be their concern. Most viewed student motivation as affected predominantly by broader cultural and economic factors; for example, instructors pointed to the fact that online students are more likely to be older, working, parents, or financially responsible for their education as reasons for their higher level of motivation when compared with students in traditional classes. Faculty also expressed concerns about factors unrelated to instructional practices that impact student success. Specifically, they noted the importance of students’ access to computers and their technological literacy. In addition, a majority of faculty expressed concern about student cheating, which they addressed in various ways (e.g., algorithmic problem-generation, lock-down browsers for testing, and randomly-generated tests), although sometimes grudgingly if they taught in disciplines where writing-intensive examinations would be more appropriate.

Recommendations

An analysis of the interview data of six online course faculty prompted the following conclusions to the study’s three research questions:
1. Faculty-student interaction was seen as essential to student success and engagement but difficult and time-consuming to promote, especially if the instructor relied on traditional teaching methods.

2. Faculty who employed more interactive tools and technology-enhanced online teaching practices rated their practices more favorably in terms of impact on student success, which was seen as closely related to student motivation. Their adoption of these tools and practices appeared to be related to their personal attitudes toward and familiarity with technology, which they gained by working in collaboration with technology specialists and by using technology in their courses.

3. Practices that were rated favorably for impact on student success were believed also to increase student engagement and be related to the applicability to the online environment of both the instructional practices and the instructional discipline in question. Broader cultural and economic factors shaping student motivation, student computer access and literacy, and cheating, were also identified as factors impacting student success in the online environment.

These conclusions and the findings discussed in the previous chapter suggest the following recommendations for policy change, reformation of instructional practices, and further research. Taken together, these recommendations indicate that optimal faculty-student dynamics in online courses will depend on endowing instructors with technological confidence (or with technologically confident collaborators), enabling them to efficiently implement technological applications that are appropriate for their particular
pedagogical goals. This is to say, the elements of course design must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, with full awareness of the students’ motivations for taking particular courses and the differing ways technology can enhance teaching in various subject areas. However, for all courses, it is a general rule that interactivity and engagement are highly dependent on feelings of community and co-presence, which can be created in online modalities with the right tools. These pedagogical objectives and goals require substantial institutional investment and support for technological access and literacy for both faculty and students, in the form of technology staff, physical resources, and discipline-specific online curricular resources. These recommendations are described in detail below.

A Dual Approach

The findings of this study suggest the advisability of a dual approach – “top-down” (e.g., reforming policy at the university or departmental level) and “bottom-up” (e.g., employing creative solutions made possible by the technology) – to mitigate the problem of overloading instructors teaching online courses. For example, it is possible for instructors to simulate small class size even in courses with very large enrollments: study participant Montgomery suggested setting up the online environment so students are only able to “see” and interact with a limited group of classmates.

Opportunities to Collaborate with Technology Professionals

Instructors teaching online courses should be provided the opportunity to collaborate with technology specialists to address the specific pedagogical goals of different online courses. This collaborative, project-oriented approach, in lieu of generic online teacher training, will be a better use of resources, more effective in integrating
unique teaching objectives, student profiles, instructor strengths, and available outside resources for successful online course design. With fuller command of the technological possibilities, instructors will be more likely to embrace a more interactive learning environment featuring virtual teams, games, or case studies, resulting in improved time management and student engagement.

**Use of Collaborative Technology Resources**

Institutions and their online education staff should research current uses of, and possible expansions for, collaborative technology resources for the specific needs of diverse disciplines and subject areas. These include websites, resource databases, and online platforms provided by textbook publishers, which have the potential for incredibly valuable contributions to instructor efficiency and the delivery of rich content to students.

**Internal Institutional Supports**

Online education at the university level must be bolstered by strong institutional supports. Specifically, tech support and computer labs are needed to enhance students’ computer access and literacy and to remove obstacles to access and literacy faced by economically disadvantaged and non-traditional students. Moreover, the institution must ensure a reliable online platform to facilitate smooth faculty-student interaction.

**Accounting for Cultural and Economic Factors in Student Motivation**

Successful online course design must take into account student motivations, seen in their larger cultural and economic contexts, for enrolling in online courses. Many students balance the desire to attain degrees and job qualifications with responsibilities beyond the classroom (working or parenting) and the inherent distractions of Internet usage. In syllabi and other introductory communications, instructors should consider
addressing the issues and pressures that students can expect to affect their performance in complex ways.

**Social Media Applications and Creative Use of Technology to Increase Online Presence**

Instructors should employ social media applications to increase instructor presence, create more dynamic online communities, and allow the students to express themselves in a more personal manner. In addition, instructors are encouraged to use technology in creative ways, such as linking to video lectures and tutorials to provide students with the semblance of face-to-face interaction.

**Case-by-case Assessment of Appropriateness of Online Modality**

The addition of online sections to university course offerings must not be done simply to increase enrollments; determination of online course offerings, class size, and the assignment of instructor workloads must be done with care and on a case-by-case basis, with particular attention to the specific needs of each discipline.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to provide educators with rich, phenomenological data concerning the faculty-student dynamic in online courses. Conducted at California State University, Sacramento, a four-year public institution of higher education currently undergoing expansion in the area of online instruction, the study provided insight into faculty assumptions, perspectives, and attitudes and an understanding of faculty-lived experiences teaching in the online environment. The study is intended to aid institutions of higher education in adopting effective online practices for the maximization of student engagement and success.
The interviews with six online course faculty revealed diverse experiences and perceptions of their experiences as online course instructors. However, the faculty were united in an overwhelming belief that fostering a vital faculty-student dynamic contributed significantly to student success and engagement. The diversity of their experiences was rooted in a variety of factors that call for institutions to provide substantial and appropriate support for both faculty and student technological literacy and access in order to ensure online course success. Specifically, institutions must recognize that successful online courses, those that engage students and promote thriving learning communities, are fundamentally different from their brick-and-mortar cousins and do not merely translate traditional teaching methods to an online environment. They employ interactive tools and technologies that presuppose a different manner of student engagement with the material and different form of faculty-student interaction, and there is no single format that is effective for all classes. Designing an effective online course, then, requires faculty and technology specialists to work together to identify the technology-based pedagogical techniques and interactive tools and that are best suited for a specific course’s content and discipline. These may now include social media applications, video, and other interactive forms of communication, and discipline-specific collaborative technology resources; but as technology expands, institutions must commit to continuing research in innovations in technology to support online teaching.

Beyond this, the faculty interviews indicated the need for institutions to give consideration to student challenges specific to an online environment. First, students in online courses are demographically different from those in traditional courses. Often older, they have usually made a personal commitment to pursuing the course in spite of
their other responsibilities (e.g., work, raising children, caretaking, financial obligations) and are consequently more motivated to succeed. At the same time, these other concerns, in addition to the distractions inherent in the online medium, can draw their attention away from the “classroom.” Instructors and institutions must take this into account to design online courses that are both engaging and flexible. Second, online courses are predicated on computer access and literacy, and institutions must invest in the human, physical, and virtual resources to ensure students have access that facilitates learning and interaction with faculty and fellow students.

Considered broadly, the detailed interviews conducted in this study point toward the importance of improvements in online education – whether in course design or faculty and student computer literacy and access – to be made at two levels: at the university or department level through reformed policy and at the faculty and staff level through creative solutions made possible by technology. With both of these applied in ways that respect the particularities of each course, institutions are likely to positively impact student success in online courses.
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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol: Faculty Participants

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewer: Tracy Kent

Interviewee:

Academic Discipline:

Consent form on file: YES / NO

Short answer (data points)

Before we begin, I’d like to get some background information about your experiences with online learning.

1. What classes in your discipline, or subject area, have you taught, or do you currently teach online at California State University, Sacramento?

2. Do you also teach, or have you taught, these same courses face-to-face? If so, for how long?

3. Please tell me when and how you originally got started teaching online?

4. Have you participated in any special training, or professional development activities geared toward helping you teach online effectively? If so, was this type of training valuable to you, and why?

5. When you first began teaching, what were your initial perceptions about what it was like to teach a fully online course?
6. What differences between teaching face-to-face versus online classes first stood out to you when you began teaching online?

7. In thinking back to that time, what significant insights have you gained since you began teaching online?

8. Please list several adjectives which describe your current feelings about what it is like to teach online.

9. When you teach online, how would you describe the level of engagement do you experience with your students? Explain.

10. Do you perceive a difference in the level of interaction with students in your face-to-face versus online class(es)? Please explain.

11. What instructional practices do you use to get students to interact with you, fellow students, or course content? Why?

12. Does your course syllabus address assumptions and expectations about the online learning environment? In other words, do you specifically address issues of participation, attendance, response times and other relevant student or instruction expectations in your syllabus or course outline?

13. What do you think are the most significant challenges you face in teaching your online course?

12. In what ways do you specifically encourage students to interact with yourself or with others?

13. What do you think are some of the major challenges for students taking your course(s) online?
14. Do you think your students feel like you are “present” in the online version of your course? Please explain, and note any challenges or successes you have experienced in this area.

15. Do you feel like using technology to communicate with your online students has enhanced or limited your effectiveness as an instructor?

17. Do you use activity reports, statistics from your learning management syste, or any other type of analytics to track your student’s progress in your online course(s)?

   A. If yes, how often do you reference such reports?

   B. If yes, please explain if you feel this information has been helpful, and the breadth/scope of information you can access in these reports.

   C. If no, do you believe having access to this kind of information would help you better assess your students’ learning styles in the class?
Appendix B: Observation Protocol

CONFIDENTIAL

Observation Protocol: Faculty Participants

Interviewee:_________________________ Date:________ Time:________

Descriptive Notes Reflective Notes
Appendix C: Artifact Review Protocol

ARTIFACT REVIEW PROTOCOL

TITLE:
RELATES:
FORMAT:
REVIEW DATE:
FILE NAME:

NOTES:

RESEARCHER’S REFLECTIONS:
Appendix D: Invitation to Participate in a Qualitative Research Study About Online Education

<DATE>

Dear <NAME>,

I am contacting you today in my role as a doctoral student at Drexel University in addition to my role as a Title IV-E MSW Project Coordinator at California State University, Sacramento. In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree, I am conducting a study focused on the online instructional dynamic as seen through the eyes of faculty. I am writing to request your participation in my study, titled “The Faculty-Student Relationship Dynamic: A Study of Faculty Perceptions Who Teach Online Courses and Their Perceptions of Instructional Practices to Achieve Student Success.”

Proposed Study Synopsis:
The purpose of this phenomenological research is to study the dynamic of faculty-student interaction in the online learning environment from the perspective of faculty who teach online courses at California State University of Sacramento. For the purpose of this study the dynamic of faculty/student relationship is defined as the phenomenon which occurs when faculty interact through various methods in the online learning environment. The study will include exploration of the perceptions, challenges, and experiences of individual faculty. The study may lead to identifying successful methods of faculty-student engagement which aid instructional teaching practices for higher completion rates. Institutions of higher education learning can also become better equipped to facilitate and support faculty-student interaction to achieve higher levels of engagement and improve student success rates in online courses. The faculty-student dynamic is defined as the experiences surrounding instructor-student interaction in the online environment, to include factors impacted by the use of various technologies and instructional design approaches. This study is focused specifically on faculty teaching online courses in three subject areas at California State University Sacramento.

Considerations:
Your participation in this research study is strictly voluntary. Should you consent to participate, you will be asked to engage in a semi-structured interview. The duration of the interview will last up to an hour and will take place either at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS) or at a mutually agreeable location. The open-ended questions that will be asked during the interview session are those questions that will allow me as the researcher to comprehend your thinking, your individual experiences, and your assumptions as well as perceptions towards teaching students in an online environment.

Confidentiality:
Should you agree to participate in the study, all reasonable steps will be taken to maintain confidentiality and to safeguard your identity as a study participant. Information gleaned from the interviews will maintained securely during the study period, and audio recordings of the interviews destroyed following completion of the study. Further, no
personally identifiable information arising from your participation in the study will be shared with colleagues or administrators at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS). Findings from the study will be reported in aggregate so as to protect the identity of participants. Further, though I may have direct or indirect contact with you (prior or in the future) in my role as Title IV-E MSW Project Coordinator, my role in this research study is separate and distinct. Your willingness or refusal to participate in the study will have no bearing on current or future interactions we may have in my role Title IV-E MSW Project Coordinator at CSUS.
Your volunteering for this interview will be your consent to participate in the study. You may opt out of this study at any time. If you have any concerns or questions about this study please feel free to ask at any time.
I thank you in advance for considering participation in this research. Should you be willing to participate in this research project, please contact me at your earliest convenience.
Sincerely,

Tracy A. Kent
Doctoral Candidate
Drexel University
Center for Graduate Studies, Sacramento
tab92@drexel.edu