ONLINE GRADUATE STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES WITH ASYNCHRONOUS COURSE DISCUSSIONS

A Dissertation in
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by
Andrea Gregg

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The dissertation of Andrea Gregg was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Ali Carr-Chellman  
Professor of Learning, Design, and Technology  
Department Head of Learning and Performance Systems  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee  

Priya Sharma  
Associate Professor of Learning, Design, & Technology  

Kyle Peck  
Professor of Learning, Design, & Technology  

Greg Kelly  
Professor of Science Education  
Associate Dean for Research, Outreach, and Technology  

Roy Clariana  
Director of Graduate Studies  
Learning and Performance Systems  

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School
Engaged dialogue is so central to Western beliefs about education (Burbules & Bruce, 2011) that one of the top faculty critiques of online education relates to perceptions of and experiences with low-quality interaction in online courses (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014; Lederman & Jaschik, 2013). A significant amount of empirical research has been done in the area of studying the quality of asynchronous online discussions (e.g., Bai, 2012; Mooney, Southard, & Burton, 2014; Wise, Hausknecht, & Zhao, 2014) but there is a lack of in-depth work pertaining to learners’ own experiences with their online course discussions (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007).

This literature gap combined with the importance of learners’ experiences (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011) and the growth of online higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015) grounded this study exploring online graduate students’ experiences with their asynchronous course discussions. The primary data were repeated interviews with eight individual graduate students resulting in over 26 hours of student-interview data that included a stimulated recall where participants demonstrated how they participated in their course discussions. This student-interview data was contextualized with instructor interviews, course analyses, and discussion forum postings.

The cases naturally fell along a continuum from learners more positive about their discussion experiences to those notably more negative of the discussions as an activity: from the learner who said “I love the discussion boards” to the learner who said she was “underwhelmed by this method of interaction.” The data were also considered thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and it was found that even the students more positive about course discussions tended to regard them as a mostly low-quality deliverable, wherein they were “going through the motions.” Findings suggest that potential reasons for the low quality experience are a lack of consistent instructor presence; the ways in which assignment requirements shape participation; factors inherent to asynchronous, written communication; and limitations of the discussion forum user interface. In spite of all of this, all but one of the participants would keep the discussions as an activity and described valuing the opportunities the discussions provided for social connections, idea articulation, and collaboration. Key implications of the study are the
need to re-conceptualize online course discussions as something other than the online equivalent of face-to-face discussions; establish pedagogical clarity regarding the purpose of online course discussions and actively facilitate them; improve LMS discussion forum interfaces such that they afford more positive engaged experiences; and explore the use of video tools to augment social presence.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Dialogue has long been viewed as an essential activity within the Western educational paradigm (Burbules, 1993; Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Soltis, 1993). For much of the history of distance education, the potential for dialogue was limited due to the lack of affording technologies (Anderson & Dron, 2012). When computer conferencing first emerged as a possibility for distance education, it was promoted as having potential advantages for meaningful dialogue over its face-to-face counterparts (Henri, 1992). In spite of this early optimism, much of the empirical research conducted on online discussions has suggested that students are not participating at the desired levels of quality (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme 2007; Palmer, Holt, & Bray 2008; Rourke & Kanuka 2009; Wise & Chiu 2011; Yulselturk 2010). Most of this empirical work has been based on content analysis (De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006) with recent studies also leveraging interaction and behavior analysis data captured by and extracted from the learning management system (LMS; Wise, Speer, Marbouti, & Hsiao, 2013).

Therefore, while a plethora of research has been conducted on online course discussions, relatively little investigation has been done toward the end of understanding students’ own perspectives (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). The study discussed here explores and analyzes in-depth how the learners themselves are experiencing dialogue in their fully online master’s degree program. This study explicitly assumes that learners’ experiences matter educationally (Dewey, 1938) and that those experiences can help inform instructional design and teaching (Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). This is a phenomenological exploration that relies primarily on interviewing as its methodology (Seidman, 2013).

In order to establish the need for this study, in this chapter I will (1) describe the current context of online higher education; (2) explore online discussions as a common activity in online courses; (3) broadly define educational dialogue as it will be conceptualized in this study; (4) discuss the current literature and identify the gap that exists pertaining to learners’ perspectives on their online course
discussions; (5) establish the need for the study; and, finally, (6) provide a very brief overview of the study itself.

**Online Higher Education**

Consistent with other iterations of distance education, online education was initially met with skepticism and concerns pertaining to its academic rigor and quality (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). The majority of faculty still view online learning with caution. Nearly 75% believe the learning outcomes in online courses to be “inferior” or “somewhat inferior” when compared to those of their face-to-face counterparts (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012). Notably, however, faculty members who have taught online tend to view it more positively than those who have not (Allen et al., 2012).

Additionally, the exponential growth of online higher education has been well documented, and universities are increasingly considering online learning to be a central part of their strategic planning moving forward. More resident students take individual online and blended courses, and distance students increasingly enroll in entire online degrees (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2015).

When one investigates faculty concerns about online learning more deeply, it becomes clear that interaction among students and their instructors is a major area of consternation. The following *New York Times* editorial written by a University of Virginia professor of English provides a more qualitative picture of the beliefs and corresponding concerns about the quality of meaningful dialogue that can, or rather cannot, take place online:

Online education is a one-size-fits-all endeavor. It tends to be a monologue and not a real dialogue. . . . A truly memorable college class, even a large one, is a collaboration between teacher and students. It’s a one-time-only event. Learning at its best is a collective enterprise, something we’ve known since Socrates. You can get knowledge from an Internet course if you’re highly motivated to learn. But in real courses the students and teachers come together and create an immediate and vital community of learning. A real course creates intellectual joy, at least in some. I don’t think an Internet course ever will. Internet learning promises to make intellectual life more sterile and abstract than it already is — and also, for teachers and for students alike, far more lonely. (Edmundson, 2012, p. A23)
Edmundson’s sentiments are consistent with a recent survey about faculty perceptions of online learning, which found that 83% of faculty believe online interactions to be substandard to those that take place in the residential classroom (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014).

**Dialogue in Online Learning**

When online education is considered within the longer history of distance education, it becomes apparent that the asynchronous interactions commonplace in today’s online courses are a relevantly recent phenomenon. Distance education has typically been defined as learning in which the students, the institution, and the instructors are separated spatially and temporally (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). As early as the 1880’s, the affordances of the postal service enabled the first generation of distance learning to occur as people were able to obtain materials while being physically separated from their teaching institution (Moore & Kearsley, 2012). This physical separation has from that time resulted in a long “preoccupation with geographical constraints along with technologies to neutralize distance and increase access” (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2010, p. 13). The technological infrastructure relied on throughout multiple generations of distance education has included the postal service for the delivery of correspondence-course learning materials, instructional television, synchronous videoconferencing, and now the proliferation of asynchronous online courses (Anderson & Dron, 2011, 2012). Asynchronous communication between individuals and their instructors was technically possible for the earliest distance learners with the mailing back and forth of materials. However, the reality is that the more seamless web-based asynchronous group communication between instructors and their students—as well as amongst students themselves—that is now relatively commonplace in online learning was not a possibility throughout most of the history of distance education.

Until relatively recently, the absence of affording technologies made meaningful asynchronous student-student and student-instructor interactions quite difficult (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). While teleconferencing technologies allowed for synchronous interactions between classrooms, until the advent of computer conferencing in the late 1980’s, distance learners were
not able to asynchronously interact in meaningful ways with each other and their instructors (Johnson, 2006). The emergence of computer conferencing, which has evolved into the more commonly described asynchronous online course discussion, and the resulting enabling of interactions of geographically and temporally separated learners and instructors, marks the transition to a post-industrial period of distance education (Garrison, 1997). Some have even argued that as a result of the Internet and these communication technologies “distance has become relatively meaningless” (Garrison, 2011, p. 3).

Additionally, in spite of Edmundson’s (2012) supposition that dialogue cannot take place in an “Internet course,” many believe that educational dialogue can and does take place within online learning environments. The asynchronous online discussion forum, common to most LMSs, is typically cited as one of the key spaces in which online educational dialogue occurs (Anderson & Dron, 2012; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Further, these online discussions are now considered a fairly commonplace activity in fully online, distance education courses (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010; Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Beyond this, such online discussions are also becoming increasingly common in both blended and face-to-face courses (Bharuthram & Kies, 2013; Bliuc, Ellis, Goodyear, & Piggott, 2011; Oliver & Shaw, 2003).

**Defining Educational Dialogue**

In his editorial, Edmundson (2012) referenced the centrality of dialogue to learning as “something we’ve known since Socrates” (p. A23). Certainly, from the prototypical image of Socrates challenging his students in rigorous questioning to more recent depictions of learners in college classrooms participating in engaged discussions, dialogue is an enduring ideal of education (Soltis, 1993, vii). Indeed, the sentiments expressed in Edmundson’s editorial question the very validity of online learning because of a belief that “real dialogue” is not possible within this context (p. A23). Specific definitions for dialogue have varied significantly in different cultures and at different historical moments (Burbules & Bruce, 2011). Further, as will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, “real” dialogue has often been defined in a prescriptive manner in which only very particular instances of certain communicative
exchanges are counted. Given the limitations of such an approach, dialogue as a key concept in this study will ultimately be considered relationally within a discursive context rather than be based on a narrowly prescribed communicative form. Toward this end, the conceptual work of Burbules (1993), Moore (1993), and Gorsky and Caspi (2005) provides helpful parameters.

Burbules (1993) grounded his explication of dialogue historically and with a focus on achieving dialogue within formal education settings. For Burbules (1993), dialogue is something its participants “enter into” rather than “do” or “use” (p. xii). It is “an activity directed toward discovery and new understanding, which stands to improve the knowledge, insight, or sensitivity of its participants” (p. 8). Burbules’ writing about dialogue assumes a face-to-face, synchronous context. Yet his conceptual definition has important overlap with the construct of dialogue within the theory of transactional distance (Moore, 1993; Shearer, 2010). For Moore (1993), “a dialogue is purposeful, constructive and valued by each party. Each party in a dialogue is a respectful and active listener; each is a contributor, and builds on the contributions of the other party or parties” (p. 24). In outlining a theoretical framework for understanding distance education through the lens of dialogue, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) articulated a way of understanding dialogue that includes both the intrapersonal and interpersonal. Where interpersonal dialogue takes place between and among learners and their instructors, intrapersonal dialogue takes place within individual learners. Gorsky and Caspi (2005) described dialogue in terms of a “discursive relationship” (p. 139-140).

The experiences one has when one “enters into” dialogue are both cognitive and affective (Burbules, 1993, p. 21). For Burbules (1993), “it is the nature of this dialogical relation to be able to ‘carry away’ its participants, to ‘catch them up’ in an interaction that takes on a force and direction of its own” (p. 20). Similarly, Moore (1993) emphasized that dialogue is marked by “positive” characteristics based on the relationship of its participants to each other “with value placed on the synergistic nature of the relationship of the parties involved” (p. 24). Lastly, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) explained that whereas
structure – of the course, of the LMS, of learning materials, of instructor facilitation – is core to interpersonal dialogue,

[the most significant element of intrapersonal dialogue is the individual learner, not the structural resources . . . Each learner, at any given time, is characterised by a constellation of variables that include, amongst others, his or her goals for the course, prior knowledge, motivation, intelligence, and anxiety. These variables determine the extent of intrapersonal dialogue that occurs and, to a large degree, its quality and effectiveness. (p. 139)

Consistent across all three of these frameworks for educational dialogue is the underlying notion that dialogue involves specific types of relational experiences on the part of its participants. As will be discussed further below, when it comes to the study of online course discussions, learners’ experiences with dialogue have received relatively little attention (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007).

**Existing Online Course Discussion Research**

The existing research on online course discussions can be framed within three broad categories: what learners say, what learners do, and what learners experience. What learners say has been largely studied through content analysis, wherein transcripts of discussion forums are evaluated, often against an existing taxonomy (De Wever et al., 2006; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Content analysis research on online discussions conducted over the years has focused on thinking processes (Henri, 1992), cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), collaborative knowledge construction (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997), and critical thinking (Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995). Many studies have considered the quality of students’ participation in their online discussions (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007; Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Wise & Chiu, 2011; Yulselturk, 2010). Other research within this broad category has explored design and instructional factors, such as instructor modeling and question type, and how they might relate to online course discussion participation (Bai, 2012; Bassani, 2011; Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2008; Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011; Ertmer, Sadef, & Ertmer, 2011; Kanuka, Rourke, &

As LMS data has become more available (Psaromiligkos, Orfanidou, Kytagias, & Zafiri, 2011), researchers have started to consider what learners do within their online course discussions. Studies conducted within this realm have found that participation requirements significantly shape learner behaviors (Lee, 2012; Oliver & Shaw, 2003; Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008) and that habitual behaviors, like reading unread messages first, can create unanticipated results wherein certain threads persist and others die regardless of discussion quality or learner intent (Hewitt, 2005). As researchers work with LMS data, a more nuanced portrait of learner behavior has emerged. Rather than understanding online course discussions only in terms of what learners post, “listening,” which correlates to the active reading of other messages, has also been established as a valid construct (Wise, Hausknecht, & Zhao, 2014; Wise, Marbouti, Hsiao, & Hausknecht, 2012; Wise, Perera, Hsiao, Speer, & Marbouti, 2012; Wise, Speer, Marbouti, & Hsiao, 2013). For instance, one study found that nearly 75% of learners’ activity within their online course discussions was spent engaging posts other than their own (Wise et al., 2013).

As mentioned above, there is notably less research in the category pertaining to what learners experience in their online course discussions (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). This research trend of failing to fully consider learners’ perspectives, notably, is not unique to online course discussions. It has also been identified in the broader literature base pertaining to online learning (Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, & Smith, 2015; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005) as well as studies on education generally (Seidman, 2013). When it comes to online course discussions, specifically, there are limited examples of studies that collect and analyze learners’ perspectives in in-depth qualitative ways (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). While we know what the research suggests about the cognitive quality of learners’ postings and have an increasingly better sense of actual participation behaviors within the LMS, we still have a fairly limited understanding of learners’ experiences with their online course discussions.
In an in-depth, qualitative, interview-based study with learners about their perspectives and experiences in their online course discussions, Rourke and Kanuka (2007) found that learners often understand their discussion activities in ways quite distinct from each other and from the pedagogical design of the activity. Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) finding concerning the differing orientations of learners to their learning activities is consistent with Dewey’s (1938) supposition that learners’ experiences take place irrespective of pedagogical intent and at times are quite counter to it. More recently, Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011) similarly argued for the importance of studying learners’ experiences, explaining that “how people experience instruction can have a huge impact on how they engage and respond – and thereby learn – from the encounter” (p. 16).

Need for this Study

As discussed above, the growth of online higher education has been well documented (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2015). This trend persists in spite of faculty concerns about online course quality generally (Allen, Seaman, Lederman, & Jaschik, 2012) and interaction quality specifically (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). Interaction between and among learners and their instructors, broadly considered here as dialogue, has long played a central role in Western education (Burbules & Bruce, 2001; Soltis, 1993). As defined by Burbules (1993), Moore (1993), and Gorsky and Caspi (2005), educational dialogue assumes both affective and cognitive experiences on the part of its participants. In a related vein, Dewey’s (1938) learner experience, also concerned with both affective and cognitive dimensions, is being revisited as an important area of study within instructional design research (Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). When one examines the research pertaining to online course discussions, a literature gap becomes apparent as there is a relatively limited number of studies pertaining to learners’ experiences with their online course discussions as discerned from their own perspectives (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007).

It is this gap in the literature (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007) combined with the educational importance of learners’ experiences (Dewey, 1938; Parrish et al., 2011), the expected continued growth of online higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015), and the central role of asynchronous online course
discussions as the primary site for educational dialogue within online courses (Anderson & Dron, 2012) that grounds this study.

**Study Overview**

This study addresses the following research question:

*How do students in a fully online graduate program experience their asynchronous course discussions?*

The study is a qualitative, phenomenological exploration of learners’ experiences with educational dialogue in their asynchronous online course discussions, and I collected data by conducting multiple interviews with eight learners enrolled in a fully online master’s degree program. The interviews used Seidman’s (2013) phenomenological interviewing model, and the student interview data was contextualized with interviews with course instructors, an analysis of two of the courses in the program, and access to seven of the eight students’ data in those two courses. All data were analyzed thematically according to the six steps of the Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis model.
Chapter 2

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

The conceptual framework grounding this study is that of learner experience (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). In the following, I will explain four key dimensions of this framework: learner experience as continuous; learner experience as qualitative; learner experiences as a transaction; and learner experience as an educator’s responsibility. I will also discuss how each of those dimensions informs this study. I will then talk briefly about how a particular experiential notion of “dialogue” is being leveraged in this study to align with a learner experience framework.

After having established the conceptual framework, I will then explore the empirical research as it pertains to online course discussions. This literature review will be organized around three broad categories, each generally corresponding to a particular research methodology used to explore the phenomenon of online course discussions: (1) what learners say (typically studied through the content analysis of discussion forum transcripts); (2) what learners do (typically studied through an analysis of learner behaviors in discussion forums based on LMS system-generated data); and (3) what learners experience (typically studied through survey and/or interview data regarding their experiences with online course discussions).

Conceptual Framework

In order to establish the dimensions of a learner experience theoretical framework, I will first explore Dewey’s (1938) conception of "experience" as it pertains to education. I will then highlight how contemporary instructional design scholars have taken up Dewey’s framework. Dewey's concept of experience in the context of education is both straightforward and sophisticated. He is perhaps the best known American scholar, practitioner, and educational philosopher to articulate a full theory of experience as well as to advocate for its central importance within education. He has also been described as the “patron saint” of progressive education (Reese, 2001, p. 23). Dewey (1938) advocated for the development of a clear definition of experience as understood within the context of education: "the more
definitely and sincerely it is held that education is a development within, by, and for experience, the more important it is that there shall be clear conceptions of what experience is" (p. 28). Given, as Dewey (1938) noted, that humans tend to think in dichotomies (p. 17), one might ask at the outset of this exploration of the concept of experience in education: "Experience as opposed to what? Experience as opposed to theory? Experience as opposed to book learning? Experience as opposed to lecture?"

Experience in Dewey's (1938) paradigm does not exist in contrast to something else that might be considered theoretical or through some other familiar dichotomy of "book smart/street smart," where "street smart" suggests learning developed through direct experience and “book smart” suggests a more abstracted, less experiential form of understanding. Rather, experience, as Dewey (1938) articulated it, occurs regardless of whether or not it is planned for or attention is paid to it.

One could argue, therefore, that Dewey's (1938) learner experience occurs in all examples of learning: from rote memorization to on-the-job internships; from multiple-choice exams to PhD dissertations; from structured lectures in which the student listens without speaking for 50 minutes to constructionist learning environments in which the student actively creates a physical object of some sort. All learners do, in fact, have experiences as they are engaged in education. Notably, Dewey (1938) attempted to challenge the false dichotomy that existed at the time of his writing between “progressive” and “traditional” education (Breault & Breault, 2005) and Dewey (1938) described it as a “great mistake” to assume that traditional classrooms were without experience (p. 26).

Dewey (1938) ultimately argued that it is the quality of those learning experiences that determines their educational value: "It is not enough to insist upon the necessity of experience. . . Everything depends upon the quality of the experience which is had" (p. 27). Quality is assessed by whether or not these experiences lead productively to future experiences, which is what Dewey (1938) described as growth (p. 36). Learning experiences under Dewey’s definition need to be understood temporally, as past experiences influence, shape, allow, and disallow present experiences, which in turn influence, shape, allow, and disallow future experiences. Each learning experience also takes place at the
intersection between the learner and his/her environment; accordingly, it is a primary responsibility of
the educator to shape the nature and quality of the learners’ experiences such that they will lead to
productive future educational experiences. In the following section, I will discuss four key elements of
Dewey's (1938) concept of experience in more detail: continuity, quality and the experiential continuum,
transaction, and the educator's responsibility.

**Learner experience as continuous.** In order to fully understand Dewey's (1938) concept of
experience as it pertains to education, it is important to first consider how he framed the temporal nature
of human experience. Dewey (1938) described a notion that he called continuity within a biological
framework of *habit*, wherein “every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and
undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent
experiences” (p. 35). As we exist from moment to moment, we are in a state of constant change. The "I"
that existed before is not the exact same "I" that exists at present, nor is the present "I" equivalent to the
"I" that will exist in the future.

In discussing how continuity works when it comes to education, Dewey (1938) described how
experiences can move a learner forward in productive or unproductive ways as pertains to their future
educational experiences:

> There is no paradox in the fact that the principle of continuity of experience may operate so as to
leaves a person arrested on a low plane of development, in a way which limits later capacity for
growth. . . . On the other hand, if an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets
up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the
future, continuity works in a very different way. (pp. 37-38)

Considering continuity more specifically with regard to learners' experiences in their online
discussions, we might try to understand if the way in which they experience their participation is such that
it leaves them "arrested on a low plane of development" and "limits later capacity for growth" or instead
"arouses [their] curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 37-38).
It is likely that the learners' experiences, when considered in all of their complexity and
contradictions, will not play out in such an easy dichotomy. Therefore, it will be important to explore the
multi-faceted nature of their experiences with this concept of continuity in mind. It is this framework of continuity, of experiences influencing future experiences, on which Dewey's concept of quality is based.

**Learner experience as qualitative.** One of the ways to understand Dewey's (1938) concept of quality exists in how he contrasts the notion of experience within the United States’ progressive education movement with what was believed at the time about experience within traditional education. He argued that though traditional education did not spend much, if any, time considering the role of the learners' experiences, it was certainly the case that learners were having experiences nonetheless: "It is a great mistake to suppose, even tacitly, that the traditional schoolroom was not a place in which pupils had experiences" (p. 26). Dewey (1938) went on to argue that it was the quality of, not the absence of, those experiences that was problematic: "The proper line of attack [against traditional education] is that the experiences which were had, by pupils and teachers alike, were largely of a wrong kind" (p. 26). It is important to note here that "quality" as Dewey discussed it did not necessarily pertain to something evaluative in a strict dichotomy of good/bad or positive/negative. Quality rather pertained to a consideration of the nature of the experience and how it connected to future possible experiences.

Dewey (1938) ultimately discussed this quality in terms of what he called the "experiential continuum," by which he meant the principle involved in "every attempt to discriminate between those experiences that are worth while educationally and those that are not" (p. 33). Educationally worthwhile experiences are not equated to a learner's enjoyment of an activity. As Dewey (1938) explained, a learner can have an enjoyable educational experience that nonetheless “promote[s] the formation of a slack and careless attitude; this attitude then operates to modify the quality of subsequent experiences so as to prevent a person from getting out of them what they have to give" (p. 26). Dewey (1938) provided a useful list of questions to elucidate the types of experiences that learners might have had in traditional schooling that were "wrong and defective from the standpoint of connection with future experience" (p. 27).
“How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the
impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced by them?” (p. 26)

“How many acquired special skills by means of automatic drill so that their power of
judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited?” (pp. 26-27)

“How many came to associate the learning process with ennui and boredom?” (p. 27)

“How many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as
to give them no power of control over the latter?” (p. 27)

It is useful to re-frame Dewey's (1938) questions in the context of the study discussed here with a
consideration of how they might relate to contemporary learners' experiences with their online
discussions. For example,

“How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the
impetus to learn because of the way in which [participation in discussion forums] was
experienced by them?” (p. 26, modifications made)

“How many acquired special skills by means of automatic [participation in discussion
forums] so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was
limited?” (pp. 26-27, modifications made)

“How many came to associate [participation in discussion forums] with ennui and boredom?”
(p. 27, modifications made)

“How many found what they did learn [in their participation in discussion forums] so foreign
to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the
latter?” (p. 27, modifications made)

The above set of questions were intentionally framed by Dewey (1938) to reflect the
miseducative side of the experiential continuum as he was attempting to emphasize what was potentially
"wrong and defective" with the learners' experiences in traditional education (p. 27). Lest it be interpreted
that this study is proceeding from an assumption about the "miseducative" experiential nature of online
discussions, it is helpful to refashion Dewey's (1938) set of questions such that they equally suggest "educative" experiences. For example,

- “How many students, for example, were rendered [excited by] ideas, and how many [gained more] impetus to learn because of the way in which [participation in discussion forums] was experienced by them?” (p. 26, modifications made)

- “How many acquired special skills by means of [deep engagement] [through their participation in discussion forums] so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was [expanded]?” (pp. 26-27, modifications made)

- “How many came to associate [participation in discussion forums] with [challenge and excitement]?” (p. 27, modifications made)

- “How many found what they did learn [in their participation in discussion forums] so [relevant] to the situations of life outside the school as to give them [increasing] power of control over the latter?” (pp. 26-27, modifications made)

Consistent with Dewey's (1938) framework, it was not in the realm of this study to label the quality of learners' experiences with their online course discussions as "good" or "bad" nor to try and ascertain simply if the learners "enjoyed" or “did not enjoy” their discussions. As Dewey (1938) argued, "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can only be judged on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (p. 38). Therefore, in this study I was interested in trying to understand in greater depth the nature of the experiences learners are having with their online course discussions and to consider how these experiences might "condition" them to experience future online discussions and future educational dialogue in particular ways. In considering the quality, or nature, of learners' experiences with their online discussions, the emphasis was not solely on what is taking place within the learner but also on the environmental realities that will accordingly shape those experiences. This leads naturally to a discussion of Dewey's concept of transaction.
Learner experience as a transaction. A transaction for Dewey (1938) is that which takes place at the intersection of the learner's internal reality and his/her external objective conditions. While up to this point we have focused primarily on the internal experiences of the learner and how they build off of past experiences and connect to future experiences, when introducing this concept of transaction, Dewey (1938) clarified that experience is not "something which goes on exclusively inside an individual's body and mind" (p. 39). Though certainly internal needs, desires, perceptions, and attitudes are important, equally important are what Dewey (1938) described as the "objective conditions" of the environment in which those experiences take place; he clarified that "It ought not be necessary to say that experience does not occur in a vacuum" (pp. 39-40).

Experience is necessarily the transaction between internal and external factors, or an individual and his/her environment:

An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation . . . The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 43-44).

If we consider this notion of an experiential transaction as it pertains specifically to the topic of this study and look at how it might be applied to learners' experiences with their online course discussions, the learners’ experiences take place at the intersection of the objective conditions of their environment and their internal conditions. Here, the learners’ environment includes but is by no means limited to the LMS, the assignment specifics, the content of the course, and the facilitating style of the instructor. Additionally, the internal conditions include but are by no means limited to the motivation, needs, intelligence, and background of the learner. In the next chapter, I will discuss in greater depth how Seidman’s (2013) phenomenological-interviewing was used to attempt to gain a deeper understanding of both the individuals’ realities and their environment.

Learner experience as an educator's responsibility. Given that experience can lead toward educative and miseducative ends, it is the job of educators to be aware of and shape learners' experiences,
wherever possible, in positive directions. Dewey (1938) made a clear case that educators need to “not only be aware of the general principle of the shaping of actual experience by environing conditions, but that they also recognize in the concrete what surroundings are conducive to having experiences that lead to growth” (p. 40). Certainly, Dewey wrote well before online learning was a possibility, let alone an increasingly common mode of education. That said, it is relatively easy to adapt his perspectives on the importance of shaping the learning environment to include an emphasis on the virtual learning environment. Considered within a contemporary framework, an instructor and/or instructional designer is responsible for maximizing the learning conditions – physical, social, and virtual – "so as to extract from them all that they have to contribute to building up experiences that are worth while" (Dewey, 1938, p. 40).

An assumption at the heart of this study is that without more in-depth qualitative research with learners, we are limited in our abilities to know how to shape the learning environment in order to allow for the most educative experiences for learners as pertains to their online course discussions. If we can learn more about the nature of the experiences taking place for learners, focusing on the transaction between their internal realities and the objective conditions of their learning environment, perhaps we can better design "environing conditions" (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). These “environing conditions” might include things like the user interface, the specific requirements of participation, and the nature of the discussion facilitation such that learners' experiences are more likely to lead to future educationally useful experiences.

While learner experience, broadly considered, is sometimes referenced in instructional design handbooks as something to consider in an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of a particular instructional design (Smith & Ragan, 2005, p. 327), it is not at present a primary research emphasis for the field (Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). In an attempt to make learner experience a focus of instructional design – to inform theoretical understanding as well as design practice – Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011) proposed a framework based largely on Dewey's (1938) notion of experience. Parrish et al. (2011)
argued that in contrast to a behavioral or cognitive perspective, "the object of experience is more holistic, requiring simultaneous attention to cognition, behavior, and affect – even agency and identity" (p. 15). Like Dewey, Parrish et al. (2011) emphasized the transactional nature of experience, highlighting the ways in which past, present, and future experiences are all connected, as well as the interactive nature of experience, wherein the learners' experiences take place at the intersection of individual characteristics and conditions in the world.

While Parrish et al. (2011) acknowledged the similarity between an activity theory framework and a learner experience framework, they also emphasized the ways in which a learner experience framework equally considers the individual and his/her world, whereas an activity theory framework focuses primarily on "external, objective activity" (p. 17). In elaborating on the complexity of learning situations, they highlighted the key situational characteristics – "those traditionally considered in the realm of designable features of instruction" – and individual characteristics – "the personal qualities and knowledge an individual brings to a situation" (Parrish et al., 2011, p. 18). A learning experience can be social, physical, and virtual. The design of a user interface or physical classroom, the flexibility of the learning environment to allow the learner to shape his/her experience, and the continuity in the design of the curriculum all relate to situational qualities that influence and shape a learning experience. While these aspects can be intentionally designed to be experienced by learners in particular ways, it is ultimately the interaction of and the transaction between those aspects with individuals' personal characteristics that determines how learners experience their learning environment. What learners bring to their learning environment – their "learning goals and interests . . . attitudes, values, hopes, beliefs, likes and dislikes, and assumptions about their role in the world" – necessarily shapes their experiences (Parrish et al., 2011, p. 18).

Like Dewey (1938), Parrish et al. (2011) argued that it is a responsibility of both educators and researchers to attend to the situational and personal characteristics shaping learners’ experiences. In response to a potential critique that the inherent complexity of experience makes it difficult, if not
impossible, to study, they argued that "the complexity of these interrelationships...does not rule out the potential for research" (p. 19). For this study, Parrish et al.’s (2011) framework for learner experience was used along with Dewey’s (1938) framework in order to inform both the data collection and analysis techniques, which will be described in detail in the next chapter.

**Learner experience and dialogue.** This study does not presuppose a specific pedagogy for online discussions—e.g., critical discourse (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007), argumentation (Weinberger & Fischer, 2006) collaborative knowledge construction (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997), critical thinking (Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995), cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), or something else. Instead, it relies on a broader notion of “dialogue” as an educational experience that is both affective and cognitive (Burbules, 1993; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005) and is wholly situated within its context (Burbules & Bruce, 2001).

The use of the term “dialogue” is not intended to be exclusive of other arguably equally useful terms like “discourse.” In some of the discussion forum research, both terms—dialogue and discourse—are used within the same study without explicit conceptual distinction (e.g., Bai, 2012; Clarke & Kinne, 2012; Ertmer, Sadef, & Ertmer, 2011; Gunawardena, et al., 1997; Yang, 2008). Rather, I rely on the notion of dialogue pragmatically because of how it is referenced in the distance education and online education literature (Moore, 1993; Shearer, 2010) and how online discussions have been broadly identified as a site for dialogue (Anderson & Dron, 2012; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, there is a natural alignment between Burbules (1993) and Burbules and Bruce’s (2001) conception of dialogue with a learner experience framework. Consider that for Burbules (1993), dialogue is something its participants “enter into” rather than “do” or “use” (p. xii). Similarly, Burbules (1993) considers that “it is an important feature of dialogue that it can phase in and out of any singular pattern, as the participants shift their approaches in response to each other” (p. 7). Further, he notes that

What underlies and shapes the patterns of interaction in a dialogue are the *attitudes, emotions, and expectations that participants have regarding each other and the value of the dialogue itself;*
these are formed partly out of the dynamic of interaction as the discussion moves along. What sustains a dialogue over time is not only lively interchange about the topic at hand, but a certain commitment to one’s partner. (p. 15, emphasis added)

The “attitudes, emotions, and expectations” of learners regarding their online discussions is of prime research concern in this study.

Also, for Burbules and Bruce (2001), dialogue "must be seen as situated in a complex net of interactions that govern how those speech acts are expressed, heard, interpreted, and responded to" (p. 1103). The following then become relevant questions in the analysis: Is the educational dialogue required as part of the course? Does the medium through which it takes place (whether a physical classroom or an LMS) encourage or even allow the intended outcomes of the activity? Is the activity designed so that students can go through the motions of dialogue without ever engaging cognitively or affectively? Do learners feel safe voicing their perspectives? How might cultural realities surrounding the subject matter shape the type of dialogue that takes place? How might the institutional norms of the school in which the dialogue takes place inform the types of responses that are encouraged and discouraged? Are the participants from cultures that allow for the challenging of "expert" perspectives like those of the teachers? Does listening count as part of dialogue? Burbules (1993) and Burbules and Bruce’s (2001) extended descriptions of dialogue align well with the learner experience focus of this study.

While one potential critique of this framework as employed here is that there is a potential circularity to it in that all education necessarily involves experience, it is important to note at the outset that this study intentionally privileged the perspectives of learners pertaining to their experiences and therefore did not assume the value of a particular pedagogy of online course discussions. It was not in the purview of this study to say what “should” take place within text-based asynchronous online course discussions, and in this regard, this study is “pedagogically agnostic.” At the same time, in thinking about learners’ experiences with this activity, it is useful to have an understanding of the range of pedagogical purposes advocated for in online course discussions, and these various pedagogical purposes are discussed throughout the following literature review.
Literature Review

Having established the conceptual framework for this study, it is time to turn our attention to the current empirical literature pertaining to online course discussions. In reviewing the relevant literature, it quickly becomes clear that there is a plethora of empirical studies in this area. It could even be suggested that this research area has been more than fully saturated and that yet another study within this domain is unnecessary and likely to be redundant. When one looks more critically at the studies, however, considering the types of questions being asked and the data being relied on to draw conclusions about online course discussions, a significant literature gap becomes apparent. While numerous studies consider the content of students' posts to discussion forums, and an increasing number of studies consider other aspects of learners' participation behaviors, there is a notably smaller corpus that investigates students' experiences in their online discussions from the learners' own perspectives.

Online course discussions: history. In order to understand some of the early literature surrounding online course discussions, it helps to have a sense of the history of this phenomenon within the much longer history of asynchronous communication within a distance education framework. When computer conferencing emerged as a potential mode of interaction for distance learners, some believed that the unique characteristics of the technology might enable discussions that were equal to if not superior to those taking place in face-to-face classrooms. It was suggested that because of the unique affordances of this technology, students could go deeper with their analysis, find more references supporting their positions, and get involved comfortably in cases when shyness might prohibit engagement in face-to-face contexts (Henri, 1992; Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995; Zhu, 1996). Given the long history of distance education’s lack of meaningful interaction among students and instructors, these were compelling possibilities.

In addition to early pedagogical enthusiasm, the availability of the full transcript of the online discussion also offered exciting possibilities from a research perspective for studying learner processes.
As Henri (1992) described it in what is often cited as the seminal framework for studying online educational discussions (DeWever et al., 2006; Rourke et al., 2001), "(CMC) [computer mediated communication] is proving to be a gold mine of information concerning the psycho-social dynamics at work among students, the learning strategies adopted, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills" (p. 118). No longer forced to record and then transcribe face-to-face classroom discussions, online discussions provide a ready-made transcript, complete with participant identification. In order to understand this new "gold mine of information" many researchers have employed content analysis methods to analyze the data of these online discussion transcripts (De Wever et al., 2006).

**Online course discussions: empirical studies.** In the following, I will synthesize the relevant literature in order to establish first, what is currently known about online course discussions and second, the gap that exists in the literature as it pertains to students' experiences in this relatively common educational activity. One way to consider the research base pertaining to online discussions is within three broad foci of research with naturally corresponding methodologies: (1) what learners say, which is typically studied through content analysis; (2) what learners do, which is typically studied through LMS generated data; and (3) what learners experience, which is typically studied through surveys and/or interviews. As stated above, this last category of empirical research, what learners experience, is notably less developed in the literature (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007).

It should be noted at the onset that these broad research trajectories are not surgically precise. Rather, they are hopefully useful categories to help organize this significant body of literature. Certainly, some studies that emphasize discussion forum content analysis or learner participation behaviors also gather some learner experience data to support their findings (e.g., Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2008; Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2012). Likewise, some studies that emphasize learners' perspectives also consider the content of the online discussions (e.g., Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). In order to organize the following literature review, I considered each study’s research question(s) and the corresponding data collection and analysis methods utilized. Therefore, studies like Choi et al. (2008) in which the bulk of
data collection and analysis work was done based on the text-based postings of the learners but also included three phone interviews is not considered a learner experience study. This is because the primary research thrust in the study centered on content analysis, and the interviews were supplementary and given less emphasis. Similarly, studies like Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) are considered learner experience studies within this organizing framework because even though the researchers read all of the postings within the discussion forum, their core research interest pertained to the learners’ descriptions of their experiences, and the conclusions the researchers drew were based primarily on what the students described through multiple, semi-structured interviews. As stated above, these are not surgically precise distinctions but are rather meant to distinguish in broad swaths these various research trends.

**What learners say.** Much of the research in the broad category of content analysis attempts to discern (and/or develop methods for the discernment of) the quality, broadly defined, of online discussion forums. In some cases, “quality” is articulated in terms of the level of critical thinking (Newman, Webb, & Cochrane, 1995); the level of interaction (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997); and the level of cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). Studies of this type are based on the methodological assumption that the discussion forum transcripts are an exteriorization of learning processes and that latent variables—like higher order thinking, critical thinking, and cognition—can be evaluated through what is observable in the text transcript (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Content analysis typically involves one or more individuals systematically coding pre-determined units of analysis against a taxonomy that specifies operational indicators corresponding to underlying learning processes (De Wever et al., 2006).

**Content analysis models.**

*Henri's (1992) cognitive model.* As mentioned above, Henri's (1992) framework is largely regarded as being pioneering in this research area (De Wever et al., 2006; Rourke et al., 2001). In her seminal piece, Henri (1992) argued that in spite of the potential "gold mine of information" (p. 118) concerning learning offered by online discussions, what was missing within this newly evolving field of
CMC was a proper framework for conducting analyses on discussion forum transcripts. Notably, Henri (1992) was quite enthusiastic about the inherent potential for the learning outcomes of online discussions to surpass those of their face-to-face classroom counterparts. With the enthusiasm common in the early days of online discussions (Rourke et al., 2001), Henri (1992) argued that asynchronous discussion, "freed of the constraints imposed by time and space, allows all participants to express themselves" (p. 118). The suggestion here was that learners in online discussions had more pedagogical opportunities because of their "freedom" from the time and space restrictions of having face-to-face counterparts. While some other methods existed at the time of the writing, Henri (1992) felt there was not yet a method up to the task of analyzing the raw data of forum transcripts. As Henri put it, a tool was needed that would “draw the marrow from the bones – to find in the exchanged messages those elements which best reveal the learning process” (p. 119).

Henri (1992) selected the thematic unit as the unit of analysis because the framework was based on an individual cognitive conceptualization of learning and had five distinct dimensions: participative, social, interactive, cognitive, and metacognitive. Each of these dimensions was defined, and the corresponding indicators were identified. These indicators were the ways in which the latent processes like cognition and metacognition are operationalized. Common to many content analysis schemes, her cognitive dimension is comprised of a taxonomy that progresses from lower levels to higher levels: from "elementary clarification" to "judgment" and "strategies" (Henri, 1992, p. 129). Henri (1992) also added another layer of coding intended to be completed after the cognitive skills were identified, wherein surface and deep processing were also identified and distinguished (pp. 130-131).

Henri's (1992) model was developed out of a study conducted for her doctoral dissertation, a dissertation written in French and therefore not reviewed here. Other key frameworks that followed started with Henri's as the basis, found it lacking in some important ways, and then built off of it to offer different frameworks (Rourke et al., 2001). In addition to developing frameworks for conducting content...
analysis on CMC environments, many researchers have also applied their corresponding proposed models empirically in order to evaluate online discussions.

**Newman, Webb, and Cochrane’s (1995) critical thinking model.** Newman et al. (1995) began by describing Henri's (1992) five dimensions and then moved forward with developing their own method for considering her cognitive dimension, specifically in regard to the presence or absence of key critical thinking indicators. Their key indicators meant to reflect important dimensions of critical thinking included relevance, importance, novelty, ambiguity, bringing in outside knowledge, linking ideas, justification, critical assessment, practical utility, and width of understanding.

In presenting this content analysis framework, Newman et al. (1995) also conducted a study to compare the level of critical thinking that took place in a face-to-face synchronous discussion with the critical thinking that took place in an online asynchronous discussion. This was done in part to answer the question of whether or not critical thinking could take place in asynchronous online discussions. They found that critical thinking was present in both discussions and at similar levels of depth but also found that the face-to-face discussions demonstrated more novelty and new ideas, whereas the discussions in the asynchronous online settings demonstrated more linking between ideas, greater support for statements, and more importance given to statements (Newman et al., 1995). These differences were explained as potentially resulting from the different nature of synchronous and asynchronous communication, wherein synchronous interactions are more dynamic and lend themselves more naturally to the production of new ideas, and asynchronous interactions, given the lack of immediate time pressures, enable participants to do more work linking and justifying ideas (Newman et al., 1995).

**Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson’s (1997) interaction analysis model.** Whereas the frameworks of Henri (1992) and Newman et al. (1995) were concerned with the assessment of individual cognitive processes, Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) interaction analysis model focused on knowledge as collaboratively constructed within the online discussion space. The specific online discussion Gunawardena et al. (1997) studied in order to develop their framework was a one-week debate held
online in preparation for an international distance education conference. Out of the process of studying the transcript of the debate as it progressed over the week, Gunawardena et al. (1997) developed a model reflecting the negotiation and ultimate construction of collaborative knowledge they observed taking place. Like many other models, theirs was based on a taxonomy that moved hierarchically through stages of lower- to higher-order levels of collaborative knowledge construction: Sharing/Comparing, Dissonance/Negotiation/Co-construction, Testing Tentative Constructions, and Statement/Application of Newly-Constructed Knowledge (pp. 413 - 414).

Gunawardena et al. (1997) also applied their model to another discussion in order to test its efficacy. They applied it to a 3-week, asynchronous online discussion that took place with 25 training managers asked to discuss the impact of educational technologies on learning in the workplace. The findings of this content analysis were so heavily geared toward the first, lower phase of collaborative knowledge construction in their model that the researchers were forced to re-consider the validity of the IAM coding instrument. Over 92% of the total messages were coded at the first phase of collaborative knowledge construction—Sharing/Comparing of Information—and less than 8% were coded at the remaining four phases. After "considerable thought," Gunawardena et al. determined that the instrument was in fact accurately assessing what took place in the online forum (p. 427). Consistent with much other research on online discussions, participants tended to engage at the lower levels of the coding scheme.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) community of inquiry (CoI) framework. Like Henri (1992) and others, Garrison et al. (2000) allowed for the possibility of asynchronous course discussions to enable cognitively rich, complex discussions but argued that this was by no means a foregone conclusion (p. 91). At the time of their initial development of the CoI framework, Garrison et al. (2000) felt that the educational use of computer conferencing was outpacing theory and that in spite of the confidence of some regarding its potential, “its effects on the quality of the learning process and its outcomes have not been well studied” (p. 87). Garrison et al. developed the CoI model after years of studying this asynchronous learning space. Their model posits that in order for effective learning to take place in
asynchronous online settings, three dimensions of a community of inquiry needed to be present: social
presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. This CoI framework and its attendant three
dimensions have since become fundamental to the theorizing and studying of asynchronous online
learning spaces (Garrison, 2007; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). In initially presenting the CoI
framework, Garrison et al. (2000) argued that both teaching presence and social presence were
subordinate to and supportive of cognitive presence.

In applying their cognitive presence coding scheme to a discussion forum transcript from an
online graduate course on health, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) found results that were very
similar to Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) in that the majority of posts were at the lower levels of the
taxonomy. Fifty percent of the messages were coded as triggering or exploration, only 17% were coded as
integration or resolution, and 33% coded as other, meaning the messages were not demonstrating
cognitive presence. Also like Gunawardena et al. (1997), Garrison et al. (2001) spent some time
considering whether there might be a flaw in the cognitive presence model itself for so few messages,
relatively speaking, to be found at the higher levels of the taxonomy (p. 21). They concluded that the
cognitive presence tool ultimately had potential for evaluating and improving the quality of the
discussions taking place in online asynchronous settings.

Gunawardena et al. (1997) and Garrison et al. (2001) found in applying their coding schemes that
students tend to participate at lower levels of their *a priori* taxonomies. As will be further highlighted
below, this is a fairly consistent finding in much of the research. Additionally, as I discuss in the next
chapter, I also found results consistent with this finding in conducting content analysis of discussion
forums in my three-semester pilot study.

**The study of online course discussions over the years.** While the above highlights some of the
key content analysis schemes developed relatively early in the period of research on online course
interactions, it is by no means an exhaustive review. The models discussed above (Garrison et al., 2000,
2001; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Henri, 1992; Newman et al., 1995) do, however, provide an illustrative
introduction into how these content analysis schemes are theorized and developed toward the end of evaluating asynchronous online course discussions. The purpose of this exploration was to exemplify the key considerations present in the content analysis of online discussions, including assumptions about text-based content reflecting latent thinking processes and individual versus group cognition. Additionally, as seen in the empirical studies of both Gunawardena et al. (1997) and Garrison et al. (2001), early findings suggested that students were performing at lower levels of quality when evaluated against hierarchical taxonomies. Garrison et al.’s (2001) cognitive presence and Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) collaborative knowledge construction schemes were also applied in other studies discussed below.

Over the years, as the field has evolved, online course discussions have been studied extensively and through a variety of lenses. Some of the studies emphasize comparisons or evaluations of various design and facilitation strategies to improve the quality of participation. These include comparing the impact of different types of facilitation prompts and discussion structures (Ertmer, Sadef, & Ertmer, 2011; Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007); considering how the content of messages relates to the content of responses (Bassani, 2011); evaluating the impact of assigning roles to students (Wise & Chiu, 2011; Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2012); and considering the impact of scripts for students to model desired levels of participation (Bai, 2012; Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2008; Stegmann, Weinberger, & Fischer, 2007). In the following section, I will highlight key findings in these various areas.

**Relationships between discussion design and student response quality.** Much of the empirical work conducted over the years in this domain has centered on considering the potential impact of different design features—the types of discussion prompts and structures for the discussion itself—on the quality of students’ participation. In this vein, Ertmer, Sadef, and Ertmer (2011) explored the relationship between the type of discussion forum question prompts (e.g., brainstorm, lower divergent, analytic convergent) and the level of critical thinking demonstrated in the students’ posts and responses (as measured by Bloom’s taxonomy, moving from knowledge up to evaluation). Ertmer et al. (2011) looked
across 10 courses, 92 question prompts, and 850 responses and found that questions asked at lower levels of critical thinking tended to result in lower levels of critical thinking in the responses. Accordingly, questions pertaining to higher levels of critical thinking did tend to result in responses with higher levels of critical thinking compared to questions at lower levels. Notable in the results was that even in response to higher-level critical thinking question prompts, student responses rarely reflected the highest levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (pp. 170-171). This was again consistent with the findings of Gunawardena et al. (1997) and Garrison et al. (2001) in that students in asynchronous online discussions rarely participate at the highest levels of these critical thinking/cognitive presence/knowledge construction domains. It is the hope of this study that a greater understanding of the learners’ experiences in these discussions will give more insight into these lower levels of participation.

In a design-based research study conducted over three design iterations of a graduate level course, Shearer, Gregg, and Joo (2015) found that having discussions take place over two weeks, as opposed to the standard single week, resulted in some students posting at higher cognitive levels in terms of the substance of their posts. Similar to the findings of Wise and Chiu (2011) that even with greater participation students were still posting at lower levels, Shearer et al. (2015) found that “Although it was felt that the two-week format around the six units was positive, it was recognized that the types of posts were still primarily at the triggering and exploration level” (p. 131).

Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, and Liang (2011) explored a similar research question in looking at the relationship between the type of discussion—structured, scaffolded, debate, and role play—and the quality of students’ responses. They used Garrison et al.’s (2001) cognitive presence coding scheme to operationalize quality and conducted the study in a class of 99 with 73 students consenting. These consenting students were broken into four discussion groups, with each group exploring the same scenario by way of a different structure. For instance, the role-play group had to discuss the topic by taking on perspectives of the community (e.g., parent, teacher) while those in the debate group had to debate the topic from a pro or con perspective. In the analysis, Darabi et al. (2011) found that students in
the structured group participated largely at the triggering level; students in the scaffolded group had responses across all four phases of the cognitive presence framework; students in the debate group reached higher levels of cognitive presence; and the role-play group participated across the levels of cognitive presence with the highest number of posts at the third level of cognitive presence: integration. Based on the results, Darabi et al. (2011) suggested that a useful approach might be to use different discussion forum structures throughout the topic such that students are able to move through all four levels of cognitive presence (e.g., from a structured forum to a role play to a scaffolded discussion).

In a similar study, Kanuka, Rourke, and Laflamme (2007) compared the relationships between assignment types (e.g., webquest, debate, invited expert, reflective deliberation, and nominal group technique) with the level of cognitive presence achieved in the students’ postings. Like Darabi et al. (2011), Kanuka, et al. (2007) used the four levels of Garrison et al.’s (2001) cognitive presence (e.g., triggering through resolution) to code the students’ responses. In studying an undergraduate course with 19 students, they found that the assignment types resulting in the highest levels of cognitive presence were the WebQuest and the debate. One of their prime explanations for this result was the fact that those assignment types, more so than the nominal group technique, the invited expert, and the reflective deliberation, “required students to actively challenge, argue, debate and aggressively confront conceptual conflicts and assumptions of their own as well as their peers” (Kanuka, et al., 2007, p. 268). One strategy for achieving higher levels of quality in student posts when evaluated against the cognitive presence phases, therefore, is explicitly asking students to challenge each other’s perspectives. At the same time, the study also found that only 50% of the posts were in the cognitive presence domain at all, and of those most were coded at the second lowest level: exploration (Kanuka, et al., 2007). Again, these findings were consistent with much of the research demonstrating that students’ participation in asynchronous online discussions tends to be at lower levels.

**Relationships between type of student posting and community formation.** Whereas the studies above (Darabi et al., 2011; Ertmer et al., 2011; Kanuka et al., 2007) considered design factors pertaining
to the structure of the discussion itself and how those factors might impact discussion quality, Bassani (2011) instead looked at how the type of the students’ initial messages (e.g., whether epistemological, technological, affective, or social) might impact later interactions among students. Here, Bassani (2011) identified three potential types of interactions: no interaction, where people do not address the initial post at all; interaction but no involvement, where technically a response is made but it does not pertain to the content of the initial post; and interaction with involvement, where a response addresses content contained in the initial post. Bassani (2011) found in his study of three discussion forums, each from a different online course, that initial messages coded as affective or social (as opposed to epistemological or technological) tended to result in the most interaction and involvement and “that messages linked to the social and affective axes can be closely related to the establishment and permanence of a VLC [virtual learning community]” (p. 938). A notable difference between Bassani’s (2011) research focus and those discussed above is that where Ertmer et al. (2011), Darabi et al. (2011), and Kanuka et al. (2007) were all concerned with the cognitive quality of student responses, whether considered through Bloom’s taxonomy or Garrison et al.’s (2001) cognitive presence levels, Bassani’s (2011) question ultimately pertained to the affective formation of a community, as operationalized through the amount of interaction and involvement between students as demonstrated in their messages. My study, in contrast, considers this notion of community not from the content of the posts themselves but rather from the reported experiences of the learners: e.g., do they feel connected and engaged with others posting in the discussion forum?

**Relationships between role assignment and quality of discussion.** A common design strategy employed over the years is to assign students to fill different explicit roles throughout a discussion. In their study looking at the impact of role assignment on discussion postings, Wise and Chiu (2011) relied on Gunawardena’s et al. (1997) 5-phase collaborative knowledge construction scale to code levels of knowledge construction reflected in individual messages (e.g., sharing information, exploring dissonance, negotiating meaning, testing and modifying, and summarizing and applying). Unlike many other studies
of discussion forums, though, Wise and Chiu (2011) did not study the posts in a static manner, simply coding them into different levels. Rather their interest was in the discussion as an ongoing event that can and should be considered through a temporal lens where patterns of participation over time can be studied. Toward this end, their research interest centered on which roles could be identified as “pivotal posts” that moved the discussion to another level or phase of knowledge construction (Wise & Chiu, 2011, p. 445). They found in studying through both content analysis (against Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) knowledge construction model) and statistical analysis of the unfolding discourse that in their blended course of 21 learners participating in the discussions, the two most pivotal roles were those of the synthesizer and the wrapper. Both of these roles reflect functions of summarizing discussion. Notably, and consistent with much of the research already discussed, the majority of the posts in the discussion were coded at the lowest level of Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) knowledge construction model, sharing information. My study will consider this type of question from the learners’ perspectives in terms of at what point they experienced their discussions shifting to higher, or simply different, levels of educational dialogue.

**Relationships between modeling and scripting desired participation and discussion quality.** A number of studies conducted over the years have considered the impacts of modeling or providing scripts for desired participation behavior on the quality of actual student participation. Toward this end, Bai’s (2012) study compared the online discussion posts of students across two semesters of the same face-to-face course. In the first phase of the study, the students, 17 total, were trained on how to recognize and code their own posts against the 4 phases of Garrison et al.’s (2001) cognitive presence framework (e.g., triggering, exploration, integration, and resolution). In the second phase of the study, the students, 14 total, were told about the cognitive presence model but not trained on how to use it. Bai (2012) found that those students trained on how to code their own posts according to the cognitive presence model ultimately participated in the discussion at higher levels of critical thinking. The implication here is that students can be trained to self regulate and improve the quality of their posts. Importantly, and reflecting
much of the empirical work in this domain concerning participation at lower levels of critical thinking, no posts in either phase of the study reflected the resolution level of cognitive presence (Bai, 2012).

**Synthesis of studies of online discussions.** Over the years, a number of studies have primarily relied on content analysis in order to assess the quality of online asynchronous course discussions. A review of key studies in this domain suggests that despite initial enthusiasm surrounding the potential of online asynchronous course discussions to facilitate engagement and reflection (Henri, 1992; Zhu, 1996), students do not consistently demonstrate expected levels of deep thinking and learning in online discussions (Ertmer, 2011; Garrison et al., 2001; Gunawardena et al., 2011; Kanuka et al., 2007; Wise & Chiu, 2011). The research does suggest some strategies for design and facilitation of online discussions that tend to result in higher levels of quality than others. In the next section of the literature review, we will broaden our focus to look at studies that consider students’ behavior in ways beyond or in addition to what students write in their individual posts.

**What Learners Do**

As the research field has evolved and data extracted from the LMS have become more available to researchers (Psaromiligkos, Orfanidou, Kytagias, & Zafiri, 2011), additional methodologies have been employed in order to consider learner behavior in online course discussions more broadly. A recent empirical literature review found social network analysis to be an increasingly used methodology in studies of online course discussions (Zhou, 2015, p. 10). In this section, I will highlight some leading research trends within the broad category of learners’ behaviors. These include the impacts on behavior of requiring online course discussions (Gulati, 2008; Lee 2012; Oliver & Shaw, 2003; Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2007); non-posting, “listening” behaviors (Wise et al., 2013); and the impacts of the system interface on learners’ post-viewing behaviors (Hewitt, 2005). Despite marked differences in each of these studies, what they have in common is that instead of looking solely, or primarily, at the content of text-based messages, they approach the online discussion as a multi-faceted system within which learners’ behaviors are considered.
Research trends in learner behavior.

Requiring online course discussions. Empirical research suggests that course requirements pertaining to online discussions meaningfully shape participation patterns (Lee, 2012; Oliver & Shaw, 2003). Additionally, it is recommended that some form of “extrinsic motivation” be included in the course to encourage high-quality discussion participation (Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2008, p. 851). Yet some have suggested that that requiring participation in online discussions contradicts a constructivist pedagogical approach (Gulati, 2008). Others (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007) have concluded that students participate pragmatically based on course requirements and that this limits the depth of their engagement in the discussions.

Assumptions built into conceptions of dialogue and constructivist learning experiences suggest some inherent tensions in requiring online course discussions. Burbules (1993) described dialogue as “marked by a climate of open participation by any of its partners” and also as “guided by a spirit of discovery” (pp. 7-8). How are “open participation” and a “spirit of discovery” impacted if the online discussion is required? Gulati (2008) suggested that requiring online discussions fundamentally contradicts the notion of constructivist pedagogy.

Enforcing requirements over participation by defining what is to be discussed and by controlling the time-scale of discussion, online education remains situated in the objectivist worldview. This objective control over the learning processes limits the opportunities for democratic knowledge construction, while enforcing conformist learning behaviour. Emphasis on participation in online discussions rewards participatory behaviour and punishes 'lurking' or silent online behaviour. This is a denial of differences in learning processes. (p. 187)

At the same time, achieving the benefits of dialogue as it might take place through asynchronous discussions seems to require student participation. Without student participation, learners will not have new ideas with which to engage; nor will they have their own ideas responded to and possibly challenged. And, if they themselves do not post, they will not have the constructivist experience of articulating their own thoughts and perspectives. It is clear—whether we consider Garrison et al.’s (2001) four phases of cognitive presence or Gunawardena et al.’s (1997) five phases of collaborative knowledge construction—that in order for students to be able to articulate their ideas, engage the ideas of others, reflect and modify
their initial understandings, and work individually and collaboratively to develop higher levels of cognitive presence, understanding, and collaborative knowledge construction, participation is necessary. As Oliver and Shaw (2003) put it, often “students simply refuse to participate. Consequently the rich promise of asynchronous learning networks for supporting students’ learning can prove hard to achieve” (p. 56). In reality, any framework for conceptualizing dialogue in asynchronous online discussion forums requires some non-trivial learner participation. It is also the case that requiring participation can impact the very nature of that participation. For instance, in studying the discussion behavior of learners in an online undergraduate engineering course, with participation worth 10% of the final grade and highly specified in terms of the number of individual postings and responses required for those points, Palmer, Holt, and Bray (2007) found that while “many students read a significant number of discussion postings, generally, the posting of new and reply messages occurred at the minimum level required to qualify for the assignment marks” (p. 857). Similarly, Oliver and Shaw (2003) found results similar to Palmer et al. (2007) in their study on medical students, 67 total, enrolled in multiple courses in an academic year. The courses were traditional residence and lecture-based, but for this study faculty were offered an optional asynchronous discussion component. All 67 of the students in the cohort were given a questionnaire with Likert responses pertaining to incentives and disincentives to them participating in the online discussion. Oliver and Shaw (2003) found, based on both data sources (the questionnaire and the content analysis), that students largely posted to the assignment requirements, engaged in very little interaction with each other beyond the posts that were required, and only reported the enthusiasm of the discussion facilitator as a strong incentive to post. Similarly, Lee (2012) conducted a study in a fairly large course (100 students) and found through content and interaction analysis that students tended to post on the due date of the discussion, responded to exactly the number of required posts, and responded to the initial post of their peers without any actual back and forth interaction.

Ultimately, achieving participation in online course discussions is something with which educators consistently struggle, and online course discussions as an activity meant to enable dialogue are
trapped in a bit of a paradox regarding learner participation. For this study, when specifically considering learners' experiences in their online discussions, it is assumed that the "environing conditions" (Dewey, 1938, p. 44) of the assignment and the "cultures" (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p. 34) of how to correctly participate in those online course discussion activities necessarily situate the learners' experiences. In attempting to gain a more in-depth understanding of the nature of learners' experiences with their online discussions, considerable analytic effort will be expended toward teasing apart the potential impact that requiring discussions has on the learners' experiences of and with those discussions. Given that "the activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed...is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition...nor is it neutral" (Brown et al., 1989, p. 32), we cannot have a robust consideration of learners' experiences with their online discussions without attending to the shaping impacts of those discussions’ formal structure.

**Learners’ participation behaviors.** While much research on online discussions focuses on the content of what students post, learner behavior in online discussions consists of more than just their visible posts. In addition to making posts, learners click on posts, skip posts, read, skim, re-read, and edit, revise, and sometimes re-read their own posts (Wise, Speer, Marbouti, & Hsiu, 2013). Some of the portraits in the literature pertaining to non-posting behavior contain a negative valence. For example, students that did not post were described in one study as “inactive” (Beaudoin, 2002, p. 147) and in another study as “lurkers” (Oliver & Shaw, 2004, p. 63). The reality is that both “inactive” and “lurking” students might be proactively reading and engaging intrapersonally with other posts. As Wise et al. (2013) suggested that to more fully understand the online discussion space, in addition to a study of the content of student posts, we also need to attend to “the less public activity of interacting with the posts of others” (p. 324).

Toward this end, Wise et al. (2013) built on a metaphor of face-to-face discussion and described this non-posting behavior as “listening.” An intentional distinction was made between the less positive portrayal of “lurkers” as passive with the active behaviors of “listeners” as learning-directed (p. 325). In
working to develop a more nuanced portrait of learners’ “listening” behaviors, Wise et al. (2013) examined the LMS data indicating when and for how long learners were in the system in addition to what took place during their session. Based on an analysis of the system-extracted data for 96 students participating in a blended course with online discussions, Wise et al. (2013) found that 73% of students’ time in the LMS was comprised of “listening” behaviors, attending to the posts of others, with only 18% of the time spent on making their own posts (p. 331). In addition to this analysis, they also performed a cluster analysis to develop three “cases” that represented common patterns of participation across clusters of learners. Their findings that the behavior of individuals differed importantly from the generalizations of the aggregate data about learners’ behaviors lends support to the idea that more in-depth study of learners’ experiences is warranted in addition to aggregate conclusions being drawn from content and interaction data analysis.

**Impacts of the system interface on learners’ post-viewing behaviors.** Investigating online discussions to determine “how and why discussions shut down,” Hewitt (2005) explored the factors that relate to particular conversational threads ending (p. 567). He first surveyed 14 students in an online graduate course that included 5 separate discussion forums over the semester. While students reported logical reasons for not participating further in particular threads—when they did not have anything new to contribute, when a thread grew contentious, or when they experienced time constraints because of another discussion forum (p. 573)—Hewitt (2005) found that actual behavioral patterns more than conscious student participation choices shaped the lifespan of discussion threads. Hewitt (2005) discovered through system data analysis that most students tended to log in, select the most recent unread messages, marked as such by the LMS, and then make their own posts in response to those recent messages. With further analysis, Hewett (2005) found that though “such an online practice seems natural and benign,” in actuality it created an unanticipated consequence wherein certain threads would end somewhat arbitrarily while others would continue. He described this as a “rich-get-richer” (p. 576) scenario in that the threads that had more unread messages would get more attention because of the way the LMS marked those
posts, which would lead to more students reading and responding in that thread. The reverse was also the case. As he explained it, a thread’s death might not have anything to do with the quality of the discussion or the students’ conscious perception of why they did or did not participate. Hewitt (2005) acknowledged that the “notion that online activity patterns can contribute to a thread’s death is counterintuitive in some respects” (p. 581) but further compared it to other situations like traffic jams in which the accumulation of individual behaviors contribute to an unintended systemic outcome.

It is useful here to return to Burbules and Bruce’s (2001) discursive framework for thinking about dialogue, comprised of “mediating objects and texts,” “other practices,” and “linguistic interactions.” As Burbules and Bruce (2001) emphasized, while each of these elements is displayed as discrete, each is mutually constitutive of the other. For example, Hewitt’s (2005) learners practiced certain habits of participation, in part mediated by how the LMS marked messages, which in turn shaped which messages they responded to, which naturally influenced the content of what they would actually post. The content of what they would post was then mediated by the LMS in terms of how it would display, so the LMS then interacted with the habitual behaviors of the learners. The time of posting then somewhat arbitrarily influenced whether or not a posting would be accessed by other students, and so on. Hewitt’s (2005) study highlighted an important caution and limitation of the present study in that the experiences and conscious intentions reported by my study participants may not have aligned with their actual behaviors.

Ultimately, all of the studies considered so far, whether about the impact of required participation (Lee 2012; Oliver & Shaw, 2003; Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2007), listening behavior patterns (Wise et al., 2013), habits of participation (Hewitt, 2005) or the relationship between question type or instructor modeling and the quality of discussions (Bai, 2012; Ertmer, Sadeq, & Ertmer, 2011; Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007) suggest the true complexity pertaining to what takes place in the online discussion space. We will shift at this point to the last category of the empirical literature review: studies that focus on the intrapersonal experiences of learners.

**What Learners Experience**
In their review of the literature pertaining to critical discourse within online course discussions, Rourke and Kanuka (2007) remarked on the lack of empirical research regarding students’ own perspectives. Instead, in much of the research, as Rourke and Kanuka (2007) observed, learners’ experiences were deterministically described based on “relationships being drawn between media characteristics and user behavior” (p. 109). What they meant here was that assumptions are made about what happens for learners experientially, both affectively and cognitively, because of what is theoretically possible given the affordances of the technology combined with the characteristics of the online discussion activity.

For examples of the phenomena Rourke and Kanuka (2007) observed, consider the following descriptions:

• “It [online course discussion] . . . thus actively engages them in a meaningful and intellectual experience [emphasis added.]” (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010, pp. 1-2).

• “It [online instructional tool] changes the way students interact, motivating them to be more attentive and participative [emphasis added], and encourages the process of learning.” (Balaji & Chakrabarti, 2010, p. 3)

• “Participation in the virtual conference demands that students become actively engaged with the course content [emphasis added] and through the interaction with their peers, negotiate the meanings of the content.” (Markel, 2001, Maximizing Learning section, para. 1)

While active engagement, meaningful and intellectual experiences, and motivation to be attentive might be some of the goals of the activities and tools pertaining to online course discussions, this does not guarantee that these are the actual experiences taking place for the learners. This brings to mind Dewey’s (1938) caution that what actually takes place for students in their educational activities might be profoundly different than the pedagogical intent of those activities (pp. 26-27). Burbules and Bruce (2001) similarly emphasized with regard to educational dialogue specifically that because of the “characteristics, styles, values, and assumptions that shape the particular ways in which they engage in
discourse,” students may participate with their own purposes “supplanting more overt teaching-learning goals [emphasis added]” (p.1110).

While these studies took place nearly a decade ago, more contemporary literature also suggests that learners’ experiences tend to be overlooked in educational research. In exploring qualitative interviewing as an underutilized method in educational research, Seidman (2013) argued that in spite of the significant amount of research conducted pertaining to education in the U.S., very little of it actually comes from the perspectives of the stakeholders themselves.

Accordingly, in this section of the literature review, I will highlight studies that do consider stakeholder perspectives regarding online course discussions. There are notably fewer studies of this type than of the “what learners say” and “what learners do” analyses of online course discussions synthesized above. Therefore, before looking specifically at studies that investigate learners’ experiences with their online discussions, I will spend some time with the research on learner experience more generally.

**Learner experience studies.** Two large-scale, long-term anthropological studies with a focus on one of the key stakeholders of higher education, the college students themselves, were published decades apart and are the work of Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) and Nathan (2005). Both studies privileged the culture of college life and emphasized similar research goals. Becker et al. (1968) asked, “What is it like to be a college student?” (p. 1), and Nathan (2005) referred to her admittedly ambitious research goal as “describing the ‘undergraduate experience’” (p. 16). Both studies proceeded from a shared assumption that there is utility in studying the experiences of students on their own terms. As Becker et al. (1968) put it: “We should study students’ views of their own experience because . . . it is the best way to find out what influences those features of student behavior we are interested in” (p. 2). Nathan (2005) claimed her study was in part motivated by her growing disconnect from the realities of her students. She found herself, along with her colleagues, wondering things like “Why is the experience of leading class discussions sometimes like pulling teeth? Why won’t my students read the assigned readings so we can
have a decent class discussion?” (p. 2). She wanted to understand how faculty perspectives and student perspectives on educational activities could be so different.

Becker et al.’s (1968) study was based on participant observation, and the fieldwork took place over two years at the University of Kansas as the three researchers attended courses, spent time in students’ residence halls, and participated in social events. They did not pretend to be students. Their analysis centered on identifying “patterns of collective action students develop in their academic work” (p. 12), and their findings pertained in large part to the predominant role grades and grade point average had in structuring the student experience. The study took place when the draft for military service was active, and for the male students, the potential of being drafted if their grades dropped was a point of concern. Another finding at the core of the study was that in spite of the faculty’s expressed frustrations that the students only seem concerned with external recognition (i.e., grades) and not true learning, the reality from the students’ perspective was that focusing on grades, rather than learning on its own terms, was ultimately what was rewarded in the system as the students experienced it.

Nathan’s (2005) methodology differed in a number of ways, though it was similar to Becker et al. (1995/1968), as she did spend an extended period of time immersed in a university. Her study, however, took place in the absence of an active draft, and Nathan (2005), in reality a university professor, actually immersed herself as a student, living in a residence hall and taking classes. A key difference in her analysis and reported findings from that of Becker et al.’s (1968) was that the role of academics in student life seemed notably less important to students than it was perceived to be by faculty and administrators. Nathan (2005) instead emphasized the 21st-century reality in which students are forced to make a multitude of decisions where coursework is only one of many things for which they are responsible. An important overlap in the findings of these two studies, though, pertained to the “cross cultural” realities between student life and faculty perceptions.

The findings and observations in each study provide support for Dewey’s (1938) argument that whether we pay attention to them or not, the reality is that learners are always having educational
experiences, and those experiences can be educative or miseducative. Additionally, learners’ goals might be distinct from, even possibly counter to, the pedagogical aims of educators. While these large-scale, broad studies deal with on-campus students and do not address online course discussions, they do provide a useful frame and transition to looking at research that focuses more specifically on learners’ experiences with online learning.

**Online learners’ experiences.** In their literature review on students’ experiences with online learning, Sharpe and Benfield (2005) observed, similar to Rourke and Kanuka (2007), that there is little research done from the students’ perspectives on their e-learning experiences; instead, the bulk of empirical research emphasizes course design and instructional strategies. Sharpe and Benfield (2005) argued that,

> [A]sking students about their experiences of e-learning gives surprising, individual, and frequently contradictory results and this in itself is good reason for listening to students more often and more thoroughly if we are to avoid making assumptions about their experience from our teacher-centred view. (“Introduction,” para. 4)

Proceeding in this spirit, in a multi-phase Australian and New Zealand combined research project, Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, and Smith (2015) worked to capture, analyze, and portray the experiences of distance learners for whom this was their first such educational experience. In the study, they conducted a phenomenological investigation of 20 first-time distance learners in order to address the literature gap regarding the learners’ perspectives as pertained to their transition to online distance education. The participants recorded a weekly video diary during a full academic semester, and the researchers identified key themes in the data relating to the learners’ challenges and successes with distance education as well as the larger context of their lives. Brown et al. (2015) reported that many of the learners underestimated the time and commitment this educational experience would require; that, in addition to the importance of the first few weeks of the semester, students experienced another crucial “at risk” time later in the semester; and that learning how to be successful as an online learner required a set of digital literacy skills the students had to develop, irrespective of gender and age. With most relevance
to my study, Brown et al. (2015) also suggested that their study reaffirms the importance of understanding the learners’ perspectives.

Similarly identifying a gap in the literature, in response to what he described as the proliferation of big data, aggregate portrayals, and “monolithic narratives” of the student experience with MOOCs and open education, Veletsianos (2013) asked his graduate students to participate in one or more MOOCs of their choice over two months and to reflect on, analyze, and present their own learning experiences. Unlike the Brown et al. (2015) study that synthesized and analyzed the data thematically, presenting supportive quotations to develop their findings, Veletsianos (2013) presented each of his students’ reflective essays as a self-contained chapter in an online-published open-book. Echoing the sentiments of many others working in this domain, he explained his decision in part because “discussions surrounding MOOCs and Open Courses rarely include student voices” (p. 5). The student essays featured experiences in a variety of MOOC platforms (coursera, edX, and others) with a range of curriculum topics (from statistics, to food studies, to the semantic web) and with a variety of affects (from frustrated to motivated to rewarded). His point about individual experiences being lost in the aggregate data was similar to the point Wise et al. (2013) made concerning the fact that aggregate data about student behavior gives a limited portrayal of what goes on for individual students, as their experiences might vary significantly.

In another study fairly broad in scope, Motteram and Forrester (2005) looked at the experiences of students in a fully online M.Ed. program. They compared the perspectives of online students with those of face-to-face students participating in the same program. Their focus was in part pragmatic, in that they intended the synthesized information about the students’ experiences to assist those working with the online programs so that they could better understand and therefore support their learners. The data for the study came from two mostly open-ended surveys sent to 27 distance learners in their program. They also conducted four semi-structured phone interviews. In addition to similar perspectives between the face-to-face and online students regarding starting a new program, they found three themes that were especially relevant for the online students: the role (affordances and constraints) of the mediating technologies; the
human support factors in terms of program support as well as their connections with other students; and the role of creating and integrating online communities. While this study differed in important ways from Brown et al. (2015), in terms of survey-based data in contrast to video diaries as well as the means of data analysis, there were overlaps in terms of the findings pertaining to the central role of mediating technologies.

Notably, technology frustrations were also a finding in the research work of Capdeferro and Romero (2012) in exploring learners’ experiences with their online collaborative group projects. Given the recognized importance of collaborative work in online education and the literature showing students’ challenges and struggles with it, the researchers specifically investigated frustration as a negative emotion experienced by online learners. Capdeferro and Romero (2012) conducted a survey-based study with 40 adult learner participants, all students in the fully online Master of e-Learning program in a Spanish university. They found that over 50% of the students identified different levels of commitment among group members as the top cause of frustration with collaborative class projects. This was followed by the closely related “unshared goals” within the group as the second leading cause of frustration. A third cause of frustration pertained to communication and the discrepancies between the learners’ needs for collaborative communication and the technological affordances of what was available. Though the study did not focus specifically on online course discussions, an overlap between the findings of Capdeferro and Romero (2012) and those of Rourke and Kanuka (2007) pertaining to learners’ differing expectations of their online experience will be discussed below in more detail. Additionally, given that technology frustrations are a consistent theme in the literature, I explored that problem in my study as well.

**Online learners’ experiences with course discussions.** Here I will look at key studies that specifically consider learners’ experiences with their online course discussions. As was discussed above, while there is a plethora of research pertaining to online course discussions, relatively little of it is conducted from the perspectives of the learners themselves. A key example of this type of research is Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) study to better understand how learners’ orient to their required online
course discussions and how they participate (or fail to participate) in critical discourse. Through repeated interviews with five students throughout the semester, they found that learners had distinct, somewhat conflicting, ways of understanding the purpose of the discussion activity (e.g., rigorous debate versus polite engagement). They also noted that students made pragmatic decisions about where to exert efforts given the overall grading scheme in the course. Like Rourke and Kanuka (2007), my study relied on in-depth multiple interviews with learners and was concerned with a learner-centered analysis.

Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) conducted two interviews with each of the twelve students in a hybrid course containing online discussions. Much like Rourke and Kanuka (2007), they were motivated by a desire to address the “voice of the students” that they regarded as missing from much of the literature. Sullivan and Freishtat (2013) identified common themes that emerged from the interview data, and their findings aligned with much of the literature in that students appreciated the learner-centered nature of the online discussions, found their experiences shaped by the interface and design of the forum within the LMS, and had different understandings of goals of the discussion. While this study focused on hybrid discussion forums and mine concentrated on entirely online course discussion experiences, the multiple interviews designed to gain emic insight into the students’ perspectives and experiences was similar to the approach I took.

In a less exploratory study, Chen, Pederson, and Murphy (2011) investigated how students used different learning strategies in approaching their participation in online course discussions. They first used a combination of Henri (1992) and Newman et al.’s (1995) content analysis schemes to identify deep and surface level messages and then categorized the corresponding learners as deep or surface processors. They then conducted semi-structured interviews with sub-groups of learners in each of those categories to determine if differences in their approaches could be identified between the deep and surface level processors. They found that while both types of learners—deep and surface processors—used cognitive strategies, deep processors tended to use more affective and metacognitive strategies (Chen et al., 2011). This study ultimately had a much more targeted research focus than mine did. There was some overlap,
though, in that the questions the researchers asked pertaining to how learners approached their participation were similarly asked in my second interview, which was designed to get at the details of the experience (Seidman, 2013).

Ultimately, like the research examples in this section, my study addressed what learners experience in their online course discussions, as described from their own perspectives.

Summary

In this chapter, I first established the learner experience conceptual framework that grounds this study. This framework has its origins in Dewey (1938) and its contemporary instructional design application in Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011). A learner experience framework assumes that learner experience is continuous, where past experiences necessarily impact future experiences. It also assumes that learner experiences are qualitative and can only be evaluated in terms of how the experience positively or negatively impacts a learner’s later experiences. Learner experience is understood within this framework as taking place at the intersection of “environing conditions” (Dewey, 1938), which exist outside the learner, and the learner as an individual. Learner experience is understood to be an educator’s responsibility, which means that educators, both instructors and instructional designers, should be attentive to how what they do positively or negatively impacts learners’ experiences. Lastly, the concept of dialogue, as described by Burbules (1993) and Burbules and Bruce (2001) is used within this framework because it assumes both cognitive and affective experiences on the part of the learner.

I next synthesized the relevant empirical literature studying online course discussions within three broad categories. The first category, what learners say, included studies that rely on content analysis methods to draw conclusions about learners’ thinking processes and the cognitive quality of learners’ participation in discussion forums. The second category, what learners do, included studies that rely on data extracted from the LMS and paint a picture of learner behavior beyond just the content of their postings. The last category, what learners experience, included studies that rely on surveys and interviews to provide more insight into learners’ perspectives on their experiences. It is this last category of the
literature to which my study contributes. Notably, my assumption was not that we should study students' experiences at the exclusion of content analysis and learner behavior studies, but rather that we should study them in addition to the existing corpus of literature. In the next chapter, I will outline the methods for this study, which was grounded in a conceptual framework that assumed both that learners' experiences are inextricable from education and that it is necessary to think about dialogue as always taking place within a larger discursive framework in which learners' experiences are a key component.
Chapter 3

Research Methods

This study was motivated by the desire to understand online course discussions from a less explored but arguably equally important perspective: that of the learners’ themselves (Rourke and Kanuka, 2007). A learner experience framework (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011) conceptually grounded this study and also guided the study design and methods utilized throughout this research project. In the following, I will specifically discuss the study site, participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. I will also address my researcher identity, the limitations of the study, and, finally, how this research project meets standards for quality.

Study Design

Consistent with the nature of the research question, the study design was a qualitative, phenomenological exploration that relied on multiple interviews with learners as its primary data source (Seidman, 2013). As Sharpe and Bennefield (2005) explain:

[A]sking students about their experiences of e-learning gives surprising, individual, and frequently contradictory results and this in itself is good reason for listening to students more often and more thoroughly if we are to avoid making assumptions about their experience from our teacher-centred view. (“Introduction,” para. 4)

In addition to spending a significant amount of time with individual learners talking about their online course discussion experiences, over 26 accumulated hours, this study also took seriously the notion of learner experience as a transaction (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). This transaction takes place at the intersection of learners’ individual realities and their environment, wherein the environment is “whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 43-44). Therefore, in addition to multiple interviews with each learner, this study contextualized these experiences with an exploration of relevant aspects of the learners’ environments, including their instructors, individual course designs, and the LMS user interface that both affords and constrains the possibilities for online course discussion experiences.
The specific design of this study was iterative and generative. Before collecting data with any official participants, I piloted the interview guide with two volunteers. For the first volunteer, I conducted interview one with very little structure and found the process quite frustrating and unfocused. Based on this, I evolved a second interview guide. After that, I re-piloted the interview guide with my second volunteer. With her, I conducted all three of Seidman’s (2013) suggested interviews. In Seidman’s paradigm, the purpose of the first interview is to learn about the participant’s life context in which the phenomenon of interest takes place. The purpose of the second interview is to explore in as much depth as possible the experience of the phenomenon from the participant’s perspective. Lastly, the third interview asks the participant to reflect more broadly on the meaning of the phenomenon (Seidman, 2013). After each interview, I modified the question prompts of the following interview. On completing the second set of interviews with my second volunteer, I re-did the first interview guide. I then conducted that first interview with eight consented participants. Based on this process, I decided that the data collection would be meaningfully enhanced by integrating “stimulated recall” into the second interview, Details of the Experience. Instead of just asking the students to describe their experience, I actually had them go into the course while screen sharing with me (which was audio and video recorded) and had them walk me through a week in the course as well as provide details about their participation in the discussion.

Following the first two interviews, I did a preliminary analysis of all the transcribed data. Based on that, I revised the draft of the third interview guide. As I was conducting the research, my question and focus were evolving. Given that the third interview is Reflections on the Meaning and that this was a study in an area that warrants improvement (as well documented in the literature and supported by my interviews), I wanted the third interview to really give participants a chance to reflect on the specifics of their own experience as well as “reflect forward” in terms of how the discussion activity could potentially be improved, if at all.

**Study Site**
As Englander (2012) explained, “when it comes to selecting the subjects for phenomenological research, the question that researchers have to ask themselves is: “Do you have the experience that I am looking for?” (p. 19). The experience at the heart of this study was participation in online asynchronous course discussions. Therefore, I relied on criterion sampling for this study, which is recommended for phenomenologically motivated studies (Creswell, 2012), and chose to conduct the study within a single, small, online graduate program. This gave the advantage of both having participants with the experience of interest to this research study and bounding the environment to the same LMS, instructors, and course design. The program that served as the site for this study is relatively small and potentially identifiable with just a little bit of context. Ultimately, the researcher has to evaluate the informative benefits of transparency with research site against the ethical questions of how individuals and programs might be portrayed (Seidman, 2013, p. 139). While the eight student participants were my primary focus, four instructors also provided me access to their thoughts, beliefs, and practices, and I feel some ethical obligation, given the size and identifiability of the program, to preserve confidentiality and only reveal curriculum-specific information as it helps to contextualize the learners’ experiences.

The program from which all of the participants were recruited is a 33-credit minimum, fully online Masters of Professional Studies (MPS). The marketing materials for the program emphasize its relevance for those already working in the field of study as well as those new to the field. The emphasis is on pragmatic skills acquirement, where what students learn can be “appl[ied] immediately” in their work environment (Program online marketing website). Additionally, the program does not require students to take the GRE, a fact that is listed on the marketing website and was mentioned as a compelling feature by a learner participant.

The program itself is almost entirely asynchronous, and in individual cases where there were synchronous components, like open instructor office hours in a particular course within the program, they are typically made optional and recorded to be available to students who did not attend. The program is offered from within an LMS with industry-standard components—email, threaded discussion forums, a
grading system, drop boxes for assignment submission, and the ability to put students in teams. Much of the content for individual courses themselves was housed in an external content management system; however, this was largely (or entirely) seamless to the students, as they referred to everything in the course by the name of the LMS. Many of the courses in the program required a student-generated blog housed outside the LMS (its housing outside the LMS did impact students’ use of it). Many of the courses also required a video-sharing site wherein students uploaded and watched videos of classmates.

At present, the program is attended by learners who are predominantly located in the United States; however, two of my participants spent extended portions of the course participating from other countries—one from a country in Africa and one from a country in Europe. From the lead faculty perspective, this program will eventually have a large international audience, and that was the key reason to keep it asynchronous. All courses in the program were developed in collaboration between a faculty subject matter expert (“author”) and an instructional designer, and each course was designed to be able to be taught by multiple instructors, which means that the course content and assignments were generally consistent across semesters with slight variations resulting from individual instructor preferences. This master course model is one of the predominant models throughout the industry of online education (Magda, Poulin, & Clinfelter, 2015). Accordingly, many of the conditions were consistent across courses in the program as the screen shots below demonstrate.

Students log into the University LMS and are shown a list of their courses.
Figure 3.1. Initial LMS view

From within the LMS, students select the course they want to enter and are taken to the course content.

Figure 3.2. Course content view

From within the course content, students can access the prompts for their discussions.

Figure 3.3. Discussion prompts view

While the window that houses the discussions themselves can be resized, and the discussion threads can be expanded or collapsed, the LMS interface for the discussions themselves was consistent across the program.
Participant Recruitment

In order to recruit participants for this study, I worked closely with the lead faculty member and faculty coordinator of this program, who were both very supportive of the study and expressed a desire to improve the program based on the findings of the study. In order to assist me with recruiting learner participants, the program coordinator forwarded an email from me inviting participation in the study to all students in the program who had completed one of the first courses in the program, Course A. As the initial target number for learner participants was between five and ten total, after failing to secure sufficient participation, the faculty coordinator re-sent the email. I stopped recruiting after nine students had indicated an interest in participating in the study. One learner participant dropped out and I ended up with eight total. In this recruiting email, learner participants were offered a $10 gift card for each interview they completed and enrollment into a $50 lottery for completing all three interviews.

In order to assist me with recruiting instructor participants, the program coordinator forwarded an email from me to a group of instructors who had both authored and taught fully online courses within the program. From that recruiting effort, I secured four instructor participants. They were not offered any remuneration for their participation. Please see Appendix A for the recruiting emails sent to potential learner and instructor participants.
In addition to securing learner and instructor participants’ consent for their interview data, I also obtained consent to review the instructors’ posts in two select courses within the program as well as to look at course content and other course communications like instructor-generated course announcements and emails sent by the instructor to the whole class. With the consent of the instructors, including the lead faculty and program coordinator, I worked with the program instructional designer to gain LMS access to all of the course sections for two selected courses (discussed in more detail below) in which my learner participants had participated. All of this was covered under the IRB (#42315) for this research study, and consent was obtained through Qualtrics surveys.

Data Collection

The data collection methods used in this study were necessarily informed by the research purpose, conceptual framework, and existing empirical literature. As discussed previously, the primary research focus of this study was the learners’ experiences themselves, and a phenomenologically focused interview sequence was determined to be the most appropriate primary data collection method for this research project (Englander, 2012; Seidman, 2013). I also relied on the notion of learners’ experiences as a transaction taking place at the intersection of the environment and individual “needs, desires, purposes, and capacities” (Dewey, 1938, pp. 43-44) and therefore contextualized the learner interviews, which were the primary data collected, by also collecting other sources of data, discussed below.

Learner interviews (primary). Each participant was interviewed on three separate occasions, with each of the three interviews having a distinct purpose and focus. Each interview was guided by Seidman’s (2013) paradigm for phenomenological interviewing described above: the first focused on life history, the second centered on details of the experience, and the third considered reflections on the meaning of the experience. While the interviews were not completely distinct, in that life context, experiences details, and meaning reflection necessarily come up throughout all of the interviews, the idea was that each interview laid a foundation for the next, and when conducted in this sequence they allowed the interviewer to explore the phenomenon in greater depth (Seidman, 2013).
Each of the three interviews took place through video-based web conferencing—either Skype or Google Hangout—at the preference of the learner participant. The interviews were all semi-structured, which means that I had an interview guide for each interview but also allowed the interview to evolve as a conversation and in what order naturally emerged as the participant and myself discussed the topics (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Before the first interview was conducted, each learner participant was invited to fill out a demographic survey. Given the learner focus of this study, the learners were able to self-identify demographic characteristics like race/ethnicity and sex/gender rather than select from researcher-determined categories. In some cases, this led to some less conventional descriptions like “white-ish.” Please see Appendix B for the demographic survey questions.

**Interview one: Focused life history.** In the first interview, I explored relevant life history with the learners in order to build rapport (Seidman, 2013, p. 98), get a sense of the life context in which they were pursuing their degree, their motivations for enrolling, and their expectations of the program and of the interactions and discussions within the program. We also talked about previous educational, discussion, and online experiences as well as the types of learners and students they were. Please see Appendix C for the interview guide for Interview one.

**Interview two: Details of the experience (including Stimulated Recall).** In the second interview, I continued with Seidman’s (2013) second of the three-interview series but also combined this approach with a stimulated recall method. While think-aloud and stimulated recall are not identical methods, I relied on a combination of both to conduct this part of the data collection. Think-aloud is a method in which “students articulate their thoughts while they engage in practical activity” (Young, 2005, p. 19). It is typically done while students are authentically engaged in the activity – like playing a video game or something else. Stimulated recall, on the other hand, is described as “an introspection procedure in which (normally) videotaped passages of behaviour are replayed to individuals to stimulate recall of their concurrent cognitive activity” (Lyle, 2003, p. 861). I asked the learners to turn on screen sharing (through either Skype or Google Hangout) so that I was able to see what they were seeing on their computer.
screens. Then I had them go to Lesson 6 in Course A, to begin, and then talk about how they would proceed with their work. I asked them things like “Walk me through how you approach a lesson in general”; “Let’s look at the discussion for this week: What did you think about when you saw this prompt? How do you post? Respond? Read?”; “When you come to the LMS interface, what are you initial thoughts and feelings?” For each of these questions, I had the learners simulate what they would do – e.g., open a word processing program or type directly in the LMS – and also talk about their decision-making and experiences. Please see Appendix D for the interview guide for Interview two.

**Interview three: Reflections on the meaning.** The purpose of the last interview was for the learners to reflect on their experiences with online discussions in the larger context of their learning and the program as a whole. Learners were asked questions about their ideal experiences with online course discussions, their beliefs about instructor expectations, and whether or not they would include discussions if they were designing courses for the program. The last question for each participant was what was “the most important thing you want your instructors to know about your experiences with online course discussions?” Please see Appendix E for the interview guide for Interview three.

**Learner discussion data (contextual).** While I had not initially planned to collect and analyze the learners’ actual posts, it became clear during the second interview, which included a stimulated recall component, that having some sense of how the learners participated would provide additional context to their experiences. Therefore, I asked consent of the learner participants to access their posts in two of the courses in the program, Course A and Course B, both of which are discussed in more detail below. The original IRB already specified that discussion posts would potentially be a part of the data collected.

**Learner participant summary.** In the following table, I provide a summary of the eight learner participants who were a part of this study. All names are pseudonyms. All demographic information was self-reported in a survey that was completed before the first survey or was information gleaned during the first interview. Unless otherwise noted, the participants worked full time. Course history indicates the courses they had completed (or were taking) at the time of the interviews. More information about Course
A and Course B is also provided below. Interview data indicates when and for how long each interview took place. All interviews were recorded in Camtasia and were fully transcribed. In total, I conducted 24 total learner participant interviews for an accumulated recorded time of 26 hours and 23 minutes of learner interview data. “Post access” in the table below indicates whether or not the learner gave consent for me to access their discussion forum posts for Course A and Course B, described in more detail below.

Table 3.1. Participant overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner Name*</th>
<th>Demographics**</th>
<th>Course history in the program</th>
<th>Interview data</th>
<th>Post Access?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abby</td>
<td>29 y/o; F; White Married w/ children Lives in PA Works as Quality Improvement</td>
<td>FA14: Course A FA14: 1 other course SP15: Course B SP15: 1 other course SU15: 2 other courses</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-20-2015 (0:40:40) Int. #2: 6-28-2015 (1:08:07) Int. #3: 7-18-2015 (1:03:41)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adele</td>
<td>51 y/o; F; White-ish Married w/ children Lives in Western Europe Works as Executive Coach</td>
<td>FA14: Course A FA14: Course B SP15: 1 other course SU15: 1 other course</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-18-2015 (1:04:51) Int. #2: 6-26-2015 (1:27:25) Int. #3: 7-7-2015 (1:35:56)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>44 y/o; F; White Married w/ children Lives in PA Works as Staff Assistant</td>
<td>SP15: Course A SU15: Course B</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-19-2015 (0:40:48) Int. #2: 7-2-2015 (0:55:52) Int. #3: 7-8-2015 (0:53:36)</td>
<td>NO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>57 y/o; M; Other Married w/ children Lives ½ in PA; ½ in N. Africa Works PT as NGO Consultant</td>
<td>SU14: Course A SU14: 1 other course FA14: Course B FA14: 1 other course SP15: 2 other courses</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-25-2015 (1:24:43) Int. #2: 7-2-2015 (1:24:01) Int. #3: 7-9-2015 (1:18:03)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>45 y/o; F; White Single no children Lives in MD Works as Training Manager</td>
<td>SP15: Course A SU15: Course B</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-17-2015 (0:47:25) Int. #2: 6-29-2015 (1:09:42) Int. #3: 7-9-2015 (0:55:40)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>45 y/o; F; White Married w/ children Lives in MA Works as Training Coordinator</td>
<td>FA14: Course A SP15: Course B</td>
<td>Int. #1: 6-26-2015 (0:54:08) Int. #2: 6-29-2015 (1:05:44) Int. #3: 7-6-2015 (1:10:58)</td>
<td>YES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Instructor interviews (contextual). I conducted one interview with each instructor participant and again used Seidman (2013) to guide the interview structure, though I compressed all three distinct interviews into a single interview. All of the instructor interviews took place after the learner interviews were completed and, like the learner interviews, were conducted through Skype or Google Hangout. In total, I conducted four total instructor participant interviews for an accumulated recorded time of 5 hours and 8 minutes of instructor interview data. Please see Appendix F for the interview guide for the Instructor interviews.

Instructor participant summary.

Table 3.2. Instructor overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Name*</th>
<th>Role w/in the Program</th>
<th>Interview data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Lead Faculty; Authored &amp; Teaches Course A Teachers other program courses</td>
<td>Int. 7-21-2015 (1:12:27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>Authored &amp; Teaches Course B</td>
<td>Int. 9-29-2915** (1:08:26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>Program Coordinator; Authored &amp; teaches other program course</td>
<td>Int. 7-17-2015 (1:29:02)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Authored &amp; teaches another program course</td>
<td>Int. 7-15-2015 (1:18:18)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms
**On leave SU15, interview conducted FA15

Course A & Course B (contextual). Instructors could uniquely participate in and facilitate the individual courses they taught through posting course announcements, grading and providing feedback on student assignments, posting to class discussions, and emailing students. Accordingly, the instructors’
facilitation approaches varied. Additionally, the norms for discussion forum participation were different across courses as well. At the time of the learner interviews, all of the learner participants had completed Course A and most had completed or were currently enrolled in Course B. Multiple learners compared their experiences in Course A and Course B regarding the discussion forum participation requirements and the course instructors. These comparisons were typically unprompted by me, affirming the salience of teaching presence in online learning experiences (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). For these reasons, I chose to analyze these two courses—Course A and Course B—in greater detail. This is an example of the way in which data analysis and data collection in this type of qualitative research are iterative and to some degree inseparable.

Both courses were 13 weeks long, structured with one lesson per week, and included similar required materials like YouTube videos, a foundational textbook (distinct for each course), and eReserve readings. Both courses required students to work in groups on a project, and both required participation in course threaded discussions worth roughly 10% of the final grade. While much was consistent across the courses, some of the differences between them pertained to the instructors as well as the discussion forum requirements and structure. The facilitating and communication style of the instructor in Course A was quite different than that of the instructor in Course B. Additionally, the Course A discussions were based on a course-provided prompt to which students were required to respond, whereas in Course B the students themselves generated the prompts and facilitated the discussions.

**Data Analysis**

While data collection and data analysis are presented here as discrete sections, in practice it is rarely the case in a qualitative research study such as this that data collection and analysis take place in entirely distinct time periods with a clear line delineating where one stops and then the other begins (Creswell, 2012). In reality, data are being analyzed as they are collected, and that analysis can inform future data to be analyzed, such as happened in this study with the student input suggesting that it would be productive to look more closely at Course A and Course B. Creswell (2012) refers to this as the “data
analysis spiral,” in which the different stages of the research project necessarily overlap and inform each other (pp. 182-188).

This iterative nature of data analysis is especially true when working directly with data and Saldaña (2013) epitomizes this by saying that “data are not coded, they are re-coded” (p. 58). At the same time, given the potential to be overwhelmed by the data, this type of qualitative study requires systematization in terms of both data management and data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I used MaxQDA, qualitative data analysis software, to help manage the data analysis. While working with all of the data that I discuss below, I employed “comparative methods” wherein I was always “making connections between data, codes, and categories” which, according to Charmaz (2006), “advances your conceptual understanding because you define analytic properties of your categories and then begin to treat these properties to rigorous scrutiny” (pp. 178-179). Consistent with the research focus of this study on learners’ experiences, I spend most of the time below discussing the ways in which the learner interviews were themselves coded (and recoded) and thematically analyzed and then discuss briefly how the contextual data were considered.

Primary data. The analysis of this study’s primary data—that data generated by the over 26 hours of interviewing learner participants—was guided by the 6-phase thematic analysis framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014). As it is described, “thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). It is highly flexible and dependent on the researcher’s judgment in determining what story to tell. What this means is that two researchers might identify and emphasize different themes within the same data set. It was therefore incumbent on me, as the researcher, to be explicit about how I determined the themes and ultimately about how those themes, as well as my analysis and presentation of them, tied back to the research question driving this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Additionally, in coding and developing the themes, I also relied heavily on Saldaña’s (2013) various strategies for coding qualitative data.
In what follows, I will discuss each of the six stages of the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014) and the steps I took in order to analyze my data and ultimately develop the participant cases and themes across cases. The six fairly straightforward stages within the thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2014) are to (1) familiarize yourself with the data; (2) generate initial codes; (3) search for themes; (4) review your themes against each other and against the data; (5) define and name themes; and (6) produce the final report. It should be noted here that, consistent with much qualitative analysis generally and thematic analysis specifically, my data analysis process was extremely iterative, organic, overlapping, and evolving.

1. **Familiarize yourself with the data.** Familiarizing yourself with the data takes place throughout the research process and is a necessary first step of arguably all qualitative analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014, p. 6626). Some key ways in which I familiarized myself early in the process with the data include conducting all of the interviews myself and re-reading the entirety of the data set many (many) times. I also reviewed and considered the data in a number of different ways. For instance, at times I would focus on a single participant case, reading and coding all three interviews for one individual. At other times, such as after the first set of interviews and before the second set, I reviewed each interview in great detail, coded for key attributes (Saldaña, 2013, p. 69), and synthesized the key elements that were beginning to take shape to inform the second interview. Please see Appendix G for an example of a participant memo written within MaxQDA after the first interview before the second.

2. **Generate initial codes.** Identifying initial codes involves reading through the data and making notes about what was in the data and what appeared as interesting and might ultimately contribute to a potential theme in some way. In initially coding the transcribed data, I followed Saldaña’s (2013) simple but effective dictate: “When something in the data appears to stand out, apply it as a code” (p. 93). In coding, just as in interviewing, I assumed that
interpretation was necessarily at play: “indeed, imagination and creativity are essential to achieve new and hopefully striking perspectives about the data” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 208). I also paid special attention to emotion as presented by the learners given that “affective qualities are core motives for human action, reaction, and interaction and should not be discounted from our investigations of the human condition” (Saldaña, p. 105). Please see Appendix H for a sample list of initial codes and a code memo.

3. **Search for themes.** At this point in the analysis, I shifted my focus from looking only at the data set to produce codes to looking at the codes themselves to see what themes might be created around the codes. One of the key practices that I employed during this phase of the data analysis was writing analytic memos. Saldaña (2013) articulates this immersive and cyclical process by noting that “Coding well requires that you reflect deeply on the meanings of each and every datum. Coding well requires that you read and reread and reread yet again as you code, recode, and recode yet again. Coding well leads to total immersion in your data corpus with the outcome being exponential and intimate familiarity with its details, subtleties, and nuances” (p. 39). Please see Appendix I for an example of an analytic memo in which I was beginning to synthesize datum specific codes and develop more abstract themes.

4. **Review your themes against each other and against the data.** At this stage, I had five themes that I defined and then re-coded all of the data against: instructor, deliverable, asynchronous/recorded/written, agency/effort, and discussion purpose. This was a crucial stage in that in reviewing these five themes against each other and against the data, it became clear that there was a crucial distinction between the effects of the interface itself and the effects of the written, recorded, asynchronous nature of text-based discussions in asynchronous online courses. Therefore when I did a later re-coding of the data, the agency/effort theme became the user interface theme in order to distinguish challenges learners were experiencing there from challenges they were experiencing due to the
asynchronous, written, required theme. Please see Appendix J for an overview of each of these five themes as they were initially articulated.

5. **Define and name themes.** Here I started to shift my focus from looking primarily internally at the data to framing concepts from the perspective of eventual readers of the final report. This is where the names and descriptions of the themes evolved to be more explanatory. As an example, rather than the theme being simply “deliverable,” which was the shorthand I used for coding, I defined the theme more thoroughly in terms of the ways in which the nature of the assignment itself shaped the learners’ experiences of the online discussion activity.

6. **Produce the final report.** Here the researcher is to “is to tell the complicated story of [the] data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of [the] analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). In this culminating phase, I worked with all of themes to identify the best way to tell the “complicated story” that addressed the core research interest in learners’ experiences with their online discussions. This story was written to address a few key questions: How did learners experience their online discussions? Why did learners have those experiences? What did they ultimately value about those experiences?

**Contextual data.** Since my fundamental research question centered on learners’ experiences, the interview transcripts (including the video of the screen sharing during the “stimulated recall”) were the primary data analyzed. Given that the majority of the literature on online discussions privileges the content of discussion postings and/or the LMS analytics generated by discussion forum activities (e.g., authoring posts, clicking on/reading other posts, editing one’s own post, replying to other posts), I instead privileged the learners’ voices and perspectives and used my analysis of those to develop a lens through which to consider the other data sets (instructor interviews, course analyses, and discussion forum postings/activities themselves). I started my analysis with this focus on learners’ experiences and developed a disciplined approach for the analysis of the learner interview data, described above, and
typically looked at the remaining data primarily for context. As described above, the additional sources of data provided context for the environment in which the learners’ experiences with online discussions took place. The analyses of these other data sources were more loosely structured, and I typically consulted these data sources to provide contextual information and clarification of the experiences described in the learner interviews.

**Discussion posts.** In analyzing the discussion posts of consented participants in Course A and Course B, I ran reports within the LMS to get basic descriptive information about the number of posts and responses for different discussions. I put this information into Excel and then calculated basic averages to see how each participant’s posting frequency compared to the class. I also looked across discussions to see which had the highest number of posts. This was done simply to contextualize the patterns of my participants compared with those of the course members as a whole. My research interest did not focus on posting frequency, so these basic numbers were just used to give a broader picture of the discussion activity within the courses. For Lesson 6 in Course A (the lesson in which I did the stimulated recall as a part of Interview Two), I also looked at the posts of the consented participants. Again, this was done just for context, as this was not a content analysis study.

**Instructor interviews.** All of the instructor interviews were coded using a process similar to that described above for the student interviews, wherein I relied heavily on the guidance of Saldaña (2013), and the emphasis was on coding as a pragmatic heuristic to be applied toward the end of qualitative analysis. I also applied constant comparison as I was working through the interviews in order to develop a profile of each instructor (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 178-179).

**Teaching presence in Course A and Course B.** In analyzing and comparing Course A and Course B, I used the “teaching presence” dimension of the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and considered the structure of the courses, the nature of the curriculum, the specific assignments, and what I could glean from instructor emails to the whole class and course announcements about the instructors’ facilitating styles. I also looked at the discussion forums
specifically—including the discussion prompts—how the forums were described in the syllabus and other places in the course, and any instructor participation within the forums themselves. It is important to note that technically I was looking at three distinct offerings of Course A (SU14, FA14, and SP15) and three distinct offerings of Course B (FA14, SP15, and SU15) since this was not a cohort program and students took the courses during different semesters.

**Data analysis summary.**

Table 3.3. *Data sources*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learner Participant interviews (8 x 3)</strong></td>
<td>Conducted the interviews myself, took notes during, wrote reflective notes after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read transcripts multiple times (all inclusive - mine and participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used coding software to tag different items of note, took notes throughout, wrote holistic thoughts throughout, identifying themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructor interviews (4 x 1)</strong></td>
<td>Conducted the interviews myself, took notes during, wrote reflective notes after</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Read transcripts multiple times (all inclusive - mine and participants)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Used coding software to tag different items of note, took notes throughout, wrote holistic thoughts throughout, identifying trends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Course A and Course B analyses</strong></td>
<td>What I could access (per both IRB &amp; technology):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Course Syllabus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Instructor announcements posted in the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Emails sent by the instructor to the entire course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Lesson content pages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Instructor and consented student postings in the discussion forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What I could not/did not access (per both IRB &amp; technology):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Any other communication the instructor had with the students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Communication that took place among the students outside of the LMS discussion forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Grades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Instructor feedback on assignments submitted to the drop boxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discussion forum postings (all of the consented participants) in Course A and Course B</strong></td>
<td>What I could access (per both IRB &amp; technology):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Content of consented students posts and responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Date &amp; time information for when consented students posted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Aggregate data about discussions across the course in terms of numbers of posts, responses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What I could not tell from the data (per both IRB &amp; technology):</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Whether or not they had read postings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Content of non-consented students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As I discuss further below, this study did not attempt what is often described as the three legged stool of triangulation within qualitative research: interviews, direct observation, and document analysis.
As Bianco and Carr-Chellman (2002) point out, observation and document analysis as traditionally conceived become complicated when considered within the context of online courses. For example,

[I]n the online environment, there are typically many more "print" resources than there may be in the face-to-face environment. What is to be considered a document? Is the chat that the students conduct at regular Monday meeting times, for example, to be considered documentary, observation, or interview data? (Bianco & Carr-Chellman, 2002, p. 257)

This complexity is one example of the many ways in which online, asynchronous education has challenged us to reconsider a number of assumptions pertaining to both research and learning. Therefore, I did not attempt to identify much of the contextual data—discussion forum posts, instructor announcements, and email—as strictly one or the other: document analysis or direct observation. I think the nature of asynchronous learning means that considering each of those textual artifacts involves elements of both.

Additionally, while it is more commonplace now, there are still concerns about interviewing at a distance, as was the primary data collection method utilized throughout the study. Establishing a human connection and trust is central to interviewing, especially this type of in-depth phenomenological interviewing. Therefore, as Seidman (2013) explained in his discussion of long-distance interviewing, it can be done but requires “a constant, thoughtful alertness on the part of the long-distance interviewer to transfer a voice on the telephone and an image on a screen to a sense of presence that honors the process of interviewing as Cook describes it” (p. 114). Here Seidman (2013) referred to the sentiments of his colleague Cook, who described interviewing as a process requiring slowing down and being present in contrast to the instantaneous, somewhat careless, form of communication at times found in texting and chatting (pp. 113 - 114). It was incumbent on me as the interviewer, using Seidman’s (2013) “constant, thoughtful alertness,” to create a space enabling in-depth interviews to take place.

I felt confident doing this, given that for the past decade, as part of my job as a manager, I have worked with a number of a people at a distance and am comfortable communicating over a distance in terms of establishing trust. I have already developed and practiced communication skills with people from whom I am geographically separated; additionally, I have led nearly 50 phone interviews for job
candidates. From a qualitative research perspective, I conducted most of my pilot study interviews through Skype. One of the things that I did in the study was to emphasize explicitly to each participant that the only thing I really cared about was their experiences. I was not looking for “good” students, there were no better answers, and nothing they said would be reported back to their instructors. I found throughout the research that I was able to ascertain meaningful and compelling perspectives from my participants.

Seidman (2013 explained that our responsibility as phenomenological interviewers is to “come as close as possible to understanding the true ‘is’ of our participants’ experience from their subjective point of view.” Interviews are not neutral data collection instruments through which objective information is accessed. Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) explained this in terms of “interviewing as a social production of knowledge” (p. 21) and positioned it in contrast to a “positivist conception of knowledge as a collection of facts to be quantified” (p. 21). Therefore, in what follows, I will explicitly discuss my researcher identity.

Researcher Identity

Because of this study’s qualitative nature, its methods needed to be as transparent as possible, including how data was collected and analyzed. I have attempted to lay all of that out in the above. This transparency also meant being explicit with my researcher identity. Given that this was an interpretive qualitative research study, my experiences and perspectives necessarily informed and shaped data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2012, p. 248). I have been a student, taking both face-to-face and online courses. I have been an instructor, of both face-to-face and blended courses. I have been an instructor for online instructors. I have been an instructional designer for fully online courses. I work with many instructional designers who partner with faculty to design and develop fully online courses, many of which include discussion forums as non-trivial components of the final course grade. Interaction is something that marketing within my organization promotes and that faculty and instructional designers
both tend to view as an important activity in online learning. In addition to these professional experiences, I am personally drawn to this topic for a few key reasons.

First and foremost, I enjoy engaging verbally and have always valued face-to-face educational dialogue. This has been my experience from my first Northwestern undergraduate course in history to my present Penn State graduate education. I appreciate the role of the instructor as both a participant in and facilitator of the discussion. I respect and learn from the process of rigorous but respectful engagement and debate wherein participants emerge with a more sophisticated understanding of the topic under discussion and a better insight into their own thought processes. Not everyone, though, I have learned over the years, experiences course discussions in this same way. I have heard others complain about the experience of residential course discussions as being forced to "listen to others go on and on" or feeling like they had to "say something smart" for the benefit of the instructor. And many do not identify with the sense of engagement that I tend to experience quite frequently in face-to-face educational dialogues. These observations made me want to explore more deeply the differences in experiences people have with educational dialogue.

The second factor that draws me to this research area pertains specifically to online course discussions. I have heard multiple people, at various institutions and in various curricula at both the undergraduate and graduate level, describe their online asynchronous course discussions with a sense of drudgery, as something they have to do solely because it is required. More than one friend has told me that the thing they hate most about their online course experiences are the required asynchronous discussions. In my own case as a student in online courses, I too experienced some of this drudgery. I felt that the extremely explicit structure of the activity, the requirements for when and how often to post, the affordances and constraints of the LMS, and the sense of not knowing whether my posts were actually being read took away some of the dynamism I tend to experience in face-to-face course discussions. At the same time, I definitely spent more time cognitively preparing my written posts and responses than I would have in the face-to-face parallel. The differences in my experiences between online discussions and
face-to-face discussions are consistent with the findings of Newman et al. (1995) in comparing the two settings for educational dialogue. Face-to-face discussions tend to contain more spontaneous interaction, whereas online discussions tend to include more well thought-out viewpoints. Nonetheless, there were still key moments in my online courses when I experienced sincere engagement with my classmates and the ideas themselves. Naturally, I wanted to learn more about what took place in those online discussions in which I did have a sense of deep, intellectual dialogue and how my experiences compared to those of other students.

A third motivating factor for this study pertained to what I believe to be a common, contemporary oversimplification of how learners experience educational dialogue. For instance, often the lecture is portrayed as only monological and classroom discussion, face-to-face and online, as only dialogical. Some of my best learning experiences were dynamic lectures that took place during my undergraduate experience. And, though I was technically not speaking during these lectures, what was taking place for me internally was highly dynamic and interactive, and arguably dialogical (Burbules & Bruce, 2001).

Similarly, one would be hard-pressed to argue that the drudgery of “being forced to post to online discussions,” a common sentiment of my friends in online courses, really reflects dialogical engagement. Lastly, this is intentionally not a comparative study in that I take seriously Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, and Tamim’s (2011) argument that the time has come to stop comparing everything done online to the residential classroom, as if the classroom were the ideal model to emulate. I did not assume in conducting this research that even though I personally have generally positive experiences with classroom discussions that those are the ideal to which online discussions should aspire.

As an example, while I personally very much enjoy face-to-face discussions, I know many others who describe them with a nearly identical sense of drudgery as some of the participants in this study describe their online course discussions. As Nathan (2005) explained in her ethnography on residential college students, in contrast to the idealized depiction of a heated seminar debate, in reality “the teacher’s role was less often to referee fervent debates than to get people to speak at all” (p. 94). This certainly
resonates with much of the research on online discussions. Again, the point is not to compare the two educational environments, just to caution against any assumptions gleaned from this study that online discussions are worse (or better) than those in face-to-face classes.

Because I did pilot interviews before I formally started data collection for this study, I learned that some participants might hesitate about sharing negative experiences given my profession within the online education field. Therefore, in conducting this study, I was always explicit with my role as both a PhD student and an employee working in the field of online learning. I made sure at the beginning of each interview to emphasize that I had no vested interested in the participants answering questions in any particular way and that all I really cared about as a researcher was learning as much as possible about their real experiences: positive, negative, or otherwise. I had a good rapport with all of my participants, and while accessing the authentic “truth” of another’s experience is not necessarily possible (Seidman, 2013), on reflection, I feel my approach yielded productive findings, which will be discussed further in the next chapters.

**Study Limitations**

Research is a collaborative effort. No one study or single methodology can really capture a complex social phenomenon like online discussions. As with the proverbial elephant being described by multiple blindfolded men, no one perspective can tell the whole reality. Online course discussions in particular have been approached through multiple perspectives, multiple blindfolded men describing their part of the elephant. Each of those methodological approaches has its inherent methodological limitations. Content analysis makes assumptions about latent experiences based on manifest content. Network analysis makes assumptions about what is going on based on system data (e.g., a click on a post suggests that a learner was reading the post). Equally limited is the fact that learner perspective analysis makes assumptions that what learners describe as their experiences has some non-trivial connection with their actual experiences. This type of research cannot definitively access what learners actually do, think, or feel. I did not focus on individual dialects, I did not measure heart rate when learners were talking to me, I
did not calculate voice inflection, and I did not evaluate posture or hairstyle. Instead I asked specific
(but hopefully sufficiently open) questions that were informed, shaped, and in some ways determined by
my research question and my conceptual framework.

Beyond the limitations discussed above, learners may have inaccurate memories of what actually
took place. In emphasizing and privileging the learners' conscious perspectives, I was not accessing the
non-conscious elements and the complex group dynamics taking place in the discussions. This was also a
moment-in-time study. I only got the learners’ experiences while they were actively enrolled in an online
program. The nature of experience is highly time dependent, and the learners’ reflections at future points
might have revealed important elements of experience that were not captured in this study. Additionally, I
only interviewed a subset of instructors in the program.

Burbules and Bruce (2001) spoke to the inherent complexity of educational dialogue in the
following description that highlights the limitations of this, and arguably any, study attempting to
understand this phenomenon:

> Such dynamics may be only partly intended or conscious (and hence only partly susceptible to
reflection or change). Participation in dialogue, even at the microlevel of apparent personal
choice, is not simply a matter of choice . . . The more that one pushes this sort of analysis, the
more the achievement, or suppression, of dialogical possibilities comes to be seen as an
expression of a group interdynamic, and not something achievable simply by changing the
choices and actions of individuals. (p. 1111)

Focusing primarily on individual learners' experiences is a lens that could become as limited as focusing
on content or interaction analysis alone. It is just one component of the inherently complex educational
dialogue.

Another limitation is that while I had an age range of participants, from age 29 to age 57, there
was only one millennial, the youngest participant, Abby, at 29. Millennials are defined as between aged
18 to 33 and have been widely discussed as bringing a unique set of perspectives to bear on key social
institutions like the workplace and education (Pew Research Center, 2014). Additionally, everyone’s
native language was English and country of origin was the United States. Therefore, this study did not
capture important cultural differences pertaining to language or country of origin.
Study Quality

Intentionally, naturalistic interpretative inquiry does not attempt to be objective or to discover the Truth but rather to make a compelling case that resonates and is internally consistent. At the same time, the question of how to establish and evaluate quality for qualitative research is far from definitively resolved (e.g., Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Hammersley, 2007; Ravenek & Rudman, 2013; Seale, 1999; Tracy, 2010). While some qualitative researchers rely on “triangulation” as a means by which to establish reliability and trustworthiness, I tend to agree with Lichtman (2013) that such an approach is ultimately grounded in a positivistic belief that objectivity in research can be achieved or at a minimum should be attempted (p. 22). As Hammersley (2007) explained, we are currently in the midst of “a sharp conflict between demands for explicit criteria, for example in order to serve systematic reviewing and evidence-based practice, and arguments on the part of some qualitative researchers that such criteria are neither necessary nor desirable” (p. 287). Seale (1999) similarly suggested that,

Quality does matter in qualitative research, but the modernist headings of validity and reliability no longer seem adequate to encapsulate the range of issues that a concern for quality must raise. The constructivist critique of criteriology has led us to see that “quality” is a somewhat elusive phenomenon that cannot be prespecified by methodological rules, though their reconstitution as “guidelines,” to be followed with intelligence and knowledge of the particular research context, may assist us in moving toward good quality work. (Seale, 1999, p. 471)

Rather than attempt to resolve the complexity here, I instead heed Seale’s (1999) call to treat qualitative research as a craft and rely on Tracy’s (2010) eight “big tent” criteria for evaluating high quality qualitative research.

In Tracy’s conceptualization, the “ends” of qualitative research projects—e.g. the findings, implications, and final report—are intentionally separated from the “means”—e.g., the methods and practices corresponding to particular theoretical paradigms. This separation of qualitative research means and ends allows a consideration of potentially universal standards for evaluating qualitative research without prescriptively defining the ways in which that quality is achieved (Tracey, 2010). In brief, Tracey argued that “excellent” qualitative studies will be distinguished by (1) a worthy topic; (2) rich rigor; (3) sincerity; (4) credibility; (5) resonance; (6) a significant contribution; (7) ethics; and (8) meaningful
coherence. In what follows, I will discuss how my research project worked toward each of those eight criteria.

(1) **Worthy topic.** Tracy (2010) argued that “good qualitative research is relevant, timely, significant, interesting, or evocative” (p. 840). In the previous two chapters, I made an extended case for learners’ experiences with their online course discussions as an important topic warranting study. To summarize that case, dialogue has long been viewed as fundamental to the Western paradigm of education (Burbules & Bruce, 2011; Soltis, 1993). Engaged dialogue is so central to our beliefs about higher education that one of the top faculty critiques of online education relates to perceptions of and experiences with low-quality interaction in online courses (Edmundson, 2012; Jaschik & Lederman, 2014; Lederman & Jaschik, 2013). In many online courses, asynchronous discussions, typically housed within the Learning Management System (LMS), are seen as the primary site for educational dialogue (Anderson & Dron, 2012; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). Over the years, a significant amount of empirical research has been done in the area of studying the quality of these asynchronous online discussions (e.g., Bai, 2012; De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Mooney, Southard, & Burton, 2014; Wise, Hausknecht, & Zhao, 2014). In spite of the broad corpus of research conducted in this area, there is a notable lack of in-depth work pertaining to learners’ experiences with their online course discussions (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). It is this gap in the literature combined with the educational importance of learners’ experiences (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011) and the exponential growth of online higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015) that grounded this study.

(2) **Rich rigor.** Achieving rich rigor requires the researcher to employ “sufficient, abundant, appropriate, and complex” theoretical concepts, time in the field, data collection and analysis methods (Tracy, 2010, pp. 840-841). As discussed above, this study was grounded in the context of online higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015), used a learner experience framework (Dewey, 1938; Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011), and relied on the theoretical construct of educational dialogue (Burbules & Bruce,
Its primary data collection methods were interviewing using Seidman’s (2013) three-interview method, which forces a rigorous structure on the data collection process:

It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interviewing participants over the course of 1 to 3 weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say. Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of the others. Finally, the goal of the process is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experience. (p. 27).

In terms of “sufficient, abundant, appropriate” time in the field (Tracy, 2010, p. 840), I had over 26 hours of interview data generated through multiple interviews with eight individual learner participants. This included a “stimulated recall” component of the second interview with participants where I was able to leverage screen sharing and observe their discussion forum participation practices. Additionally, the primary data were contextualized with over five hours of interview data from conversations with four individual instructor participants, as well as analyses of the program and two of the courses in the program and an exploration of consented learner participant discussion posts. All of the interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed using Saldaña’s (2013) coding methods, Charmaz’s (2007) constant comparative methods, and Braun and Clarke’s (2006) framework for thematic analysis. I also used reflective memos in order to capture my observations and reflections throughout the iterative and cyclical process of data collection and analysis. All of this together, I believe, contributed to the rich rigor of this study.

(3) Sincerity. Sincerity, in Tracy’s (2010) conceptualization, means that “the research is marked by honesty and transparency about the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles as well as about how these played a role in the methods, joys, and mistakes of the research” (p. 841). I have been explicit about the limitations of this study and about my own researcher identity, including a discussion of my role as a student, both residentially and online, and of my role as a professional in the online higher education industry. I have been explicit regarding my interest in ultimately leveraging this research to improve the quality of online higher education. As discussed above, I piloted and adjusted my interview protocol based on early experiences. I experienced moments of researcher fortitude in that seven of eight of my
participants had completed or were completing two of the courses in the program, which prompted me to do a deeper analysis of those courses. The fact that three of the eight participants emailed me unprompted after the interviews were over to share additional thoughts showed me that I both formed sincere connections with them and was able to strike an authentic chord.

(4) Credibility. Tracy (2010) wrote that “Credibility refers to the trustworthiness, verisimilitude, and plausibility of the research findings” (p. 842). The findings of this study are discussed in detail in the next two chapters. In these chapters, I first provide a detailed overview of the context for this study, discussing the program itself, two specific courses within the program, and the perspectives of four of the program instructors. I next describe each participant as an individual case, emphasizing both their overall learner profiles and their particular experiences with their online discussion forum participation. Then I present themes that exist across the individual participant cases pertaining to experiences with online course discussions. All of these findings are grounded in the self-described experiences and practices of the participants as well as my own observations and insights gleaned from non-trivial time spent in the research space. These elements are offered in a manner that arguably “shows,” in that I “provide enough detail that readers may come to their own conclusion about the scene” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843). This is done in large part through direct participant quotations to support the suppositions that I make throughout the two findings chapters and hopefully lends credibility to this study.

(5) Resonance. Resonance refers to the “research’s ability to meaningfully reverberate and affect an audience” (Tracy, 2010, p. 844). One of the primary ways in which a research study can achieve resonance is through its “transferability and naturalistic generalizations” (p. 845). This is importantly distinct from statistical generalizations and instead refers to the ways in which the readers themselves can relate their own similar situations to the findings of the study. At the time of this writing, this study has been read and discussed in detail by four faculty members, three of whom have taught extensively online. All the readers reported learning from the study, suggesting it did meaningfully resonate with them and will transfer to their future teaching experiences.
(6) **Significant contribution.** As with all of the other criteria above, this criterion is highly context dependent. To evaluate the significance of a study’s contribution, “researchers gauge the current climate of knowledge, practice, and politics” in order to assess its impact (Tracy, 2010, p. 845). In the case of this particular study, this involves considering what is known and believed about online course discussions and how this study confirmed, expanded, and challenged those understandings. In the final chapter, I discuss the ways in which the findings of this study suggest potential theoretical, practical, and future research implications. Theoretically, this study attested to the viability of existing concepts within the community of inquiry model. It also supported the need to re-conceptualize online course discussions as something other than simply the online version of the face-to-face class discussion. Practically, this study suggested the need for pedagogical clarity pertaining to the purpose of online course discussions and the importance of active instructor participation in this activity as well as the importance of improving the LMS discussion forum interface.

(7) **Ethical.** For Tracy (2010), ethics are both a means and an end. This includes ethics in participant recruitment, data collection, relationships with participants, data analysis, and data sharing, and an ethical study is ultimately marked by ethical practices throughout the research process (p. 847). The IRB (###) specified how participants were recruited and the ways in which data was collected. While many ethical decisions were naturally guided by the study’s IRB specifications, there were also other “gray” areas outside of those formal dictates that required me as the researcher to make ethical decisions. Examples of those in this study include my decision to cloak the identity of the program and its instructors; my attention to egalitarian, respectful relationships with my participants; my repeated explicit emphasis on being non-judgmental of individual participant practices; and my decisions to portray each individual as fairly as possible with respect for the multiple, valid ways in which individuals experience learning and ultimately their worlds.

(8) **Meaningful coherence.** According to Tracy (2010), “Studies that are meaningfully coherent eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical
framework and situational goals” (p. 848). I took care from the initial conceptualization of my research interest through the theoretical orientation, data collection, and data analysis methods of this study to work toward alignment. I relied heavily on Burbules (1993) and Burbules and Bruce’s (2001) theoretical construct for educational dialogue because of its emphasis on subjective experience that aligned naturally with the learner experience framework (Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011; Dewey, 1938). This was done intentionally instead of using a similar concept like discourse, which is sometimes used interchangeably with the term dialogue in the online discussion literature (see, for example, Bai, 2012; Clarke & Kinne, 2012; Ertmer, Sadef, & Ertmer, 2011; Gunawardena, et al., 1997; Yang, 2008). Given that the research question ultimately pertained to understanding this phenomenon from the learners’ own perspectives, I utilized repeated interviews with learner participants as the primary data source rather than looking primarily at the content of their discussion forum posts. In writing up the findings, I relied heavily on the participants’ own words to support my suppositions, also consistent with the learner experience emphasis of the study. Ultimately, meaningful coherence is much like resonance in that “the reader should feel as though the piece lived up to what was promised” (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). To this, I will say that I have received consistent feedback that reading this study has provided people with a deeper understanding of learners’ experiences with their online discussions, which was the initial research interest.

Summary

In the above, I described and justified the selection of a small, fully online graduate program as the site for this study, the use of Seidman’s (2013) phenomenological interview framework to guide the participant interviews, the strategic analysis of the contextual data of discussion forum posts, instructor perspectives, and the design of two courses in the program. I also discussed how I analyzed the data, relying on a highly iterative coding approach (Saldaña, 2013) within a larger paradigm of Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis. Lastly, I presented my own researcher reflections and identity, discussed the study’s limitations, and articulated why I believe this study meets criteria for quality (Tracy, 2010).
In the next two chapters, I will present the findings of the study. In the first findings chapter, I will describe the environing conditions that contributed to the learners’ experiences, and I will then describe each of the eight student participants as an individual case with a unique set of online course discussion experiences. In the second findings chapter, I will describe the themes pertaining to online learners’ experiences with asynchronous course discussions that existed across the singular cases. This two-part structure of presenting findings is similar to that of Rourke and Kanuka (2007) as well as that of McDyre’s (2014) research work. I began this study intending to do only a thematic analysis, wherein I would identify the themes of learners’ experiences that seemed to transcend individual learner cases. However, as I conducted the interviews and got to know the students’ experiences in a deeper manner, it became clear that it would be useful to tell two distinct but related stories: one of each learner as a distinct case with particular experiences and one of the themes that existed across the individual cases.
Chapter 4

Environing Conditions and Participant Cases

Consistent with Dewey’s (1938) and Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap’s (2011) discussion of learner experience as a transaction that takes place at the intersection of the “environing conditions” and a learner’s internal reality, in this chapter I will first provide an analysis of the environing conditions that existed for all of the study participants and then will describe the particularities of each participant case. In considering the environment in which the learners’ experiences took place, Dewey’s (1938) description is helpful:

An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation . . . The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had. (Dewey, 1938, pp. 43-44, emphasis added)

Within the context of this study, key environing conditions that existed for all of the learners included the program itself in which the participants were enrolled, the particularities of the courses they took, and the perspectives and practices of their course instructors.

Environing Conditions

Course A and Course B analyses. In spite of this not being a cohort program where students take courses in lock step sequence, always with the same classmates, participants did comment on becoming more familiar with some of their classmates from having been in previous courses with them and/or working with them on small group projects (typically comprised of three to five members). Additionally, there was a recommended sequence of courses that encouraged the students to take Course A first and Course B second, though they were able to proceed in different orders, as some did.

I chose to analyze the courses using the “teaching presence” dimension of the CoI framework for understanding asynchronous online learning environments. While “teaching presence” is sometimes mis-described as teacher presence, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) intentionally defined this dimension as inclusive both of what happens during the course, most often facilitated by the instructor,
and the design of the course itself. The three components of the teaching presence dimension as initially defined (Garrison, et al., 2000) include the instructional design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. While Garrison, et al. (2000) tended to refer to the “instructional design and organization” as a function of the teacher, in many cases, that role is performed collaboratively by a number of partners in the process of designing and developing online learning. From a learner experience perspective, the significance of this concept is not who did the design and organization of the course but rather how that design and organization becomes an “environing condition” in which learners experience their online course discussions. A later study of the “teaching presence” factor of the CoI model found that rather than three factors, from the perspectives of students, only two factors were salient: course design and directed facilitation (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). This is consistent with how the participants in this study described their experiences, as they did not distinguish direct instruction from instructor facilitation.

While I could access all components of the course design, my access to the directed facilitation was limited to the use of course announcements, instructor emails sent to the entire course, and instructor posts to the discussion forums. As discussed in the Methods chapter, I could not access instructor grades and feedback on assignments or instructor emails sent to individual students. There were 3 distinct offerings of Course A (SU14, FA14, and SP15) and 3 distinct offerings of Course B (FA14, SP15, and SU15) in which participants were enrolled. In conducting the analysis, I compared the instance of each course across semesters and, for the most part, there was little variation between the different semester offerings of the courses.

Table 4.1. Course A & Course B – Course Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course A – Course Design (Teaching Presence)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Course Overview</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course A is an introductory, foundational survey course that according to the course author’s description is “miles wide and inches deep” (instructor interview). While students could alternate from this sequence, it is suggested as the first course they take in the program. Additionally, at the time of the interviews all eight of the participants had completed this course.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Course Assignments

The course assignments across the various offerings of Course A were the following. (Note: There was slight (never more than 5%) variation of the final percentage worth for each assignment across the three semesters so averages are listed below.)

- **Research-Based Article Abstract** - develop an abstract of a research article in the field (roughly 10% of final grade)
- **Blog Reflections** - blog reflection due every other week, no responses required (roughly 10% of final grade)
- **Individual Critical Incident Interview Transcript** - interview someone in the field and create a transcript of the interview centering on a critical incident analysis (roughly 10% of the final grade)
- **Case Study Analyses** - done in groups, 4 total (roughly 30% of the final grade)
- **Discussion Forum Participation** - post once, respond twice (roughly 10% of the final grade)
- **2 Quizzes** - multiple choice in the LMS (roughly 10% of the final grade)
- **Small group presentation** (roughly 15% of the final grade)
- **SARI completion** (roughly 5% of the final grade)

### Discussions Overview

The discussions as an activity for the course were described in the syllabus across all three offerings of the course as the following: "Each week you will be asked to participate in an online question. You are expected to post comments, and you will be graded on the quantity and quality of your submissions."

On the Activities page of each lesson where a discussion was required, the prompt(s) for the discussion were included along with this verbiage (identical across the semesters): "Respond to two postings from your peers. **Note:** If two posts have been made to one peer, choose another peer’s response for your posting. Responses and postings will be evaluated on quantity and quality of your submissions."

Additionally, the following note was included in the syllabus pertaining to timing of participation: "It's important to begin your lessons EARLY in the week (Monday) in order to support dialog in the discussion forums. Be sure to check back to add comments and read your classmates' posts throughout the week."

### Course Length

Each offering of the course was 13 weeks, one week per lesson.

### Course Materials

The required foundational textbook was the same for each semester offering.

### Course Structure

One lesson was covered each week of the course. All content and assignments were available to the students at the start of the course.

### Lesson Content

Each lesson week typically assigned 2-3 chapters from the required textbook, 1-3 YouTube videos, and about 4-6 pages of lesson content written by the course author. Each lesson also included a video summary.
**Course B – Course Design (Teaching Presence)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course Overview</th>
<th>It was suggested that Course B be taken immediately following Course A in the sequence of courses. It was described as a “next generation” approach in the field of study and whereas Course A was by design more of a survey course, this course is more of a deep dive into a particular approach within the field.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Assignments</td>
<td>The course assignments across the various offerings of Course B were the following. (Note: There was slight (never more than 5%) variation of the final percentage worth for each assignment across the three semesters so averages are listed below.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Partner Interview</strong> – Interview an assigned classmate to practice the methods being taught in the course (roughly 3% of the final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Research-Based Article Abstract</strong> – develop an abstract of a research article in the field (roughly 10% of final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Quizzes</strong> – two content-based quizzes (roughly 10% of the final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Team Case Study Analysis and Presentation</strong> – work in assigned teams on a case relevant to the field (roughly 20% of the final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Practitioner Interview</strong> – required to interview expert in the field (roughly 20% of the final grade)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Team Appreciative Coaching and Analysis Presentation</strong> (roughly 20% of the final grade)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Threaded Discussion Leadership and Response</strong> – individual learners responsible for generating the initial prompt and facilitating the weekly discussion for most of the discussions. In a smaller number of the discussions, though, the prompts were provided. (roughly 12% of the final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• <strong>Blog Reflections</strong> – blog reflection every week, minimum one response required (roughly 5% of final grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions Overview</td>
<td>The discussions as an activity for the course were described in the syllabus across all three offerings of the course as the following: “The content and readings will drive the weekly threaded discussion topics or questions that each of you will have an opportunity to generate once, but also answer every week. When you are the threaded discussion leader, you will have 24 hours to post your question to the class. So by 12:00 a.m. every Thursday, topics or question(s) must be posted so that each student has ample time to respond. Depending on the number of students in the course, there may be multiple leaders and thus, multiple topics/questions posed each week. If you are leader, you must still reply to any other leaders' topics. When developing your question, think about what occurs to you as you read through the content or view videos. What is intriguing, or compelling? What makes you think, gives you pause, resonates for you? What could make your classmates think in terms of the content? Focus on topics or questions that will illicit critical thinking among your peers. As leader, you are also expected to respond, to discussion appropriately.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | This first week, I will pose the question and each student should respond by the close of the week. You will also receive the schedule of threaded discussion leadership in advance, so that you can plan ahead. You should comment on at least
There was a great deal of similarity in the Course Design component of the Teaching Presence dimension when comparing Course A and Course B. Both courses had the same look and feel and general layout. They were structured in very similar ways in terms of lesson breakdown, types of activities and assignments, and use of video and textual materials. A key difference in terms of the discussion forums themselves was that in Course A, all of the discussions had a pre-defined prompt to which the students were required to respond. In contrast, while there were some examples of that type of discussion in Course B, the majority of the discussions were student-generated and -facilitated. This was mentioned in multiple student interviews as impactful to students’ learning experiences. Another notable difference was the amount of guidance provided to the students for how they should participate in and think about their discussions. More information was provided in Course B than in Course A, guiding students in how to think about and participate in the discussions. Next we will look at the Directed Facilitation element of each course.

Table 4.2. Course A and Course B – Directed Facilitation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course A – Directed Facilitation (Teaching Presence)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructors</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Instructor Participation in Discussion</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Forums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Announcements and/or emails to entire class</th>
<th>Matt: Did not post at all in the discussions in the semester reviewed (SP15)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Robert:</strong> In the 2 classes that he taught, Robert emailed the class every few days with announcements/reminders about assignments, and technology challenges he was facing. He used email to communicate with his learners. He mentioned multiple times his lack of awareness of technology, describing himself as an “old codger” and expressing his desire to connect beyond the asynchronous communications in the course. Toward this end he did a webcast and had a subset of students participate. His emails also involved other course logistics (e.g., clarifications of how teams are formed, reminders of administrative due dates). He did not mention the discussions at all except to say in one email note that he was looking for ways to connect beyond the blogs and the discussion forums (this is in the first semester the course was offered and his first time ever teaching online). In one of his email notes he did state that he had read all of their blogs but was not going to grade them, in large part, he explained because he was not sure how to do so technically.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>In the second time he offered the course, he offered 3 optional webinars (for extra credit) as he said in an email that he found teaching online less personal than teaching the class face-to-face. He said in an early email to the class that he found it less personal but that there were the blogs and the discussion forums for the students to “bare your souls, (Heh, if people can use matchmaking online, they can learn online,)” Another email suggested they contact technical support, rather than him, for any technical questions: “Please understand that old professors are less technically adept than most of you!!!”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He did indicate in an email that the way they were naming their discussions and blogs needed to be updated to help him be able to grade them (interestingly, where some were naming them appropriate to the content, he was requesting they be named specific to the assignment so that he could more easily find them in the grading log.) In this email, in mentioning the way they were naming their discussion posts, he was suggesting some engagement with the posts, even if just to grade them.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>His emails to the whole class were quite similar across both semesters that I looked at (SU14 and FA14).</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Matt:</strong> In contrast to Robert, who used the LMS class emails to keep the class updated with both logistical (reminders of assignment due dates) and coaching type communications (e.g., “I’ve enjoyed reading your blogs thus far”), Matt used the course announcements that displayed on the homepage of the course content web site for a similar purpose. Matt took over the course about one and half weeks in because the initially assigned instructor did not work out and used his first announcement to introduce himself and explain that he was now the lead instructor for the course. Unlike Robert, he presented a more confident technical presence and did not mention his lack of experience or confidence using the tools of the course. He also used the announcements for more direct instruction in that he summarized the required readings in addition to the logistical components. He did not mention the discussions at all in his course announcements, which he posted sometimes multiple times a week, and other times with a few weeks in between announcements.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NOTE:</strong> Except for the first semester in which CourseA (SU14) was offered and</td>
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</table>
taught by Robert, wherein he posted a single announcement letting the class know that he had posted his introduction and understood if students struggled with technology as he did as well, he did not use the announcements tool any further. In contrast, except for a single email to the class at the end of the semester announcing that the final grades were posted, Matt did not send any all-class emails. Essentially, they used different tools (Matt used the Course Announcements and Robert used the Emails within the LMS to achieve the same ends of the facilitating component of the Teaching Presence dimension of the CoI model.) Notably both had very similar communications (Matt in the course announcements and Robert in the course email) reminding students that they needed to complete their SARI requirements in order to receive a grade for the course.

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### Course B – Directed Facilitation (Teaching Presence)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructors</th>
<th>FA14 (Bethany; Course Author)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SP15 (Bethany; Course Author)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SU15 (Bethany; Course Author)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Instructor Participation in Discussion Forums

For the most part, Bethany did not participate within the weekly discussions themselves. Instead, she used the gradebook itself to make her individual comments to students. While I did not review the gradebook or the comments, I know this is the case because when we did the Stimulated Recall as a part of the second interview, student participants would open their grades to show me how she provided feedback. There were a few notable exceptions to her not participating in the forums themselves in that the first forum was the only one for which she provided the prompt, and for the last forum in which students were asked to highlight their most impactful experience in the course, she would generally respond.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Announcements and/or emails to entire class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whereas Matt and Robert seemed to use either Course Announcements or Course Emails exclusively and respectively to serve the same pedagogical purposes, for the most part, Bethany used them both to communicate the same things and most of her Course Announcements and Course Emails mirrored each other containing the exact same text. As she explained it in a follow up email: “I feel it's better to have two chances to get the news out than just one method.” The subject line of the email was posted as the Title of the Course Announcements. The nature of these communications was similar to that of Matt and Robert’s communications in that she reminded students of logistical components in the course and addressed any technical issues that arose throughout the semester (as an example, early in the semester there were issues with uploading videos, and Bethany let the class know that she had reported the issue to the Course Designer.)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While there was a great deal of similarity in the course design between Course A and Course B, the biggest distinction was in the Directed Facilitation component of the Teaching Presence dimension of CoI. One observable difference in the instructors’ communications was that Bethany seemed much more
intentional about establishing the social presence component of her communications. She used more
punctuation (e.g., “!”) and also signed her emails with a variety of signoffs (e.g., “be well,” “peace to you
all,” “my best,” and “thanks and be well”). She also made it a point in her first class email/course
announcement to emphasize that students should address her by her first name. While neither Matt nor
Robert signed their emails/course announcements as Dr. or Professor, they also did not make an explicit
point of asking students to use their first names in addressing them. That said, all three instructors
mentioned multiple times their desire to connect with their students. Matt provided his cell phone number,
Bethany mentioned multiple times being available to assist, and Robert set up optional webinars in an
attempt to connect more with the students. In addition to what I could glean from the courses themselves,
this also came through in the ways Robert (author and instructor of Course A) and Bethany (author and
instructor of Course B) spoke in their interviews. The difference in Bethany’s directed facilitation style
when compared to those of Matt and Robert was mentioned by the students and will also be further
discussed in the next chapter as one of the key themes that emerged across participant cases.

Program instructors. In what follows, I provide a description of each of the four consented
instructors who taught courses in the program.

Table 4.3. Program instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructor Name*</th>
<th>Role w/in the Program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Lead Faculty; Authored &amp; Teaches Course A; Teachers other program courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bethany</td>
<td>Authored &amp; Teaches Course B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry</td>
<td>Program Coordinator; Authored &amp; teaches other program courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Authored &amp; teaches another program course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*pseudonyms

Among the four online program instructors interviewed as part of this study, some common
themes emerged across their descriptions, as did some notable distinctions in their teaching philosophies
and practices. All four of the instructors interviewed had authored the course in the program for which they were the primary instructor. Each of their courses included threaded discussions, typically worth between 10% to 20% of the students’ final grade. Each of the courses also included a required blog that existed outside the LMS, unlike the threaded discussions that were housed within the LMS. Different types of discussions were included within each of the courses. Some were small group discussions, wherein students used the forum to work together to produce a shared deliverable (e.g., a group paper or presentation), and some were whole-class discussions, wherein a question prompt would be either provided by the instructor or by individual students. In addition to using a common platform for the threaded discussions, all four instructors typically required that each student make an initial post and then respond to at least two other students as well. While a common practice in online discussion structuring is to have a date, typically early to mid-week, by which students are required to make their initial post and then a due date toward the end of the week by which they are required to respond to other posts, none of these courses or instructors used that practice. Jessie did remark that she tried doing so at one point but found it very burdensome to manage and felt that structure was not consistent with the needs of adult learners. All four of the instructors interviewed attested to the fact that the discussions were very time consuming from the instructor perspective. Each also mentioned the limitations due to the absence of non-verbal communication as well as the ways in which the asynchronous reality of the discussions fundamentally altered their communicative nature.

In addition to those similarities across instructors, there were notable differences as well. Whereas Barry and Robert both felt it was not feasible for the instructor to read all of the student posts in the discussions, Jessie and Bethany believed it was central to the success of the discussion and important for student’s learning that they, as the course instructors, were active in the discussions. Both Barry and Robert were consistent in being disappointed in the quality of the asynchronous discussions, being relatively hands off in their facilitation roles (neither read all of the posts in their class discussions), and at the same time not wanting to get rid of the discussions because of a lack of a comparable alternative.
Bethany and Jessie had notably different approaches and philosophies regarding the importance of the asynchronous discussions in the courses they taught and their role within them. Jessie and Bethany also both discussed intentionally modeling for their classes the types of engagement and communication they wanted to students to participate in in the discussion forums. I discuss each instructor in more detail below.

Robert - Author and instructor of Course A.

*I do try to read some of the posts, but it's a little overwhelming, because with 20 students in the class and everyone required to post, and not all the posts are that interesting. Most of them, you get the feeling that people just want to check the box so that they can meet the grade requirement for—they're graded on the blogs and the discussion items. And sometimes I get the feeling that they're just doing that because they have to do that, and the quality of those interactions isn't very good.*

Robert was the author, program coordinator, and primary instructor for one of the foundational required courses in the program. He was admittedly not comfortable with technology, and this is something that was echoed by multiple participants who had take his course (Course A, described above.) Much like Barry and the marketing materials for the program, Robert’s philosophy about the program—both the residential and online version—was that it should be pragmatic, skills-based, and targeted to adults already working in the field. He believed “there is value in studying and doing at the same time. In other words. . . we like the idea that you could take what you learned in class, apply it on the job and then come back with good questions based on that experience.”

Robert was regarded, both by himself and others, as one of the leaders in the field. He explained that the program was intentionally designed to be asynchronous, as the expectation was that eventually it would have a large international market: “I am planning for that international, because I know from my experience that the market outside the U.S. for this degree is bigger than the one inside the U.S.” At the same time, he regarded the lack of synchronous communication as a problem when it came to the quality of interactions between and among the students and himself. Further, he did not regard the online discussions as very useful for interactions, and he himself did not read all of the posts or actively participate in the discussions. He felt that overall the discussion forums were of low quality for interaction
and “just not very good” and felt that the students’ level of participation was poor overall: “the students, even when they're given what I consider a pretty tough question, often they give a minimalist answer.” When asked for his perspectives on why these interactions are of low quality, he discussed concerns about having things in writing and the potential risk factor there and how they might limit people’s willingness to share authentically. He commented on being much more personally engaged in the residential classroom where communication was synchronous and not recorded.

His overall observation about the discussions in his class was that they are of low quality:

People comment. Other people may read them and post a remark. But in my group, there's not a lot of back and forth on discussion items. Again, it's like people talking to themselves, and they're required to do it for the course. So 90% of the time, I get the feeling they're just doing it because they're required to do it; not pulling teeth kind of discussions. I don't know how to respond to those, so I typically don't. Maybe that discourages further participation. I don't know.

When asked if he would consider getting rid of them as an activity, he immediately responded with, “No, because I don't know what the alternative is.”

*Bethany - Author and instructor of Course B.*

The majority of students are really thinking deeply about the questions, whether they're mine or whether they're peers' questions. They're giving it a great deal of thought. I think that the lame comments are few and far between.

Bethany was the author and primary instructor for Course B, described above. Before teaching online for this program, she had completed a non-credit certificate in online teaching. She also had personal experiences in online learning from the student perspective, having taken some hybrid courses that included discussions. As she recalled, she thought at the time she participated in the LMS-based discussions: “I don’t like this. I hate this.” At the time of being a student, she experienced the asynchronous nature of the discussions as limiting for her:

You'd have to wait hours, if not days, for someone to respond to you or the idea that electronic communication can be so uncertain. Because I'm a big believer in non-verbal communication and there is no body language, there is no voice intonation, there is no facial expression to read when you're reading on a discussion board. So, that was tricky, as a graduate student for me.

Notably, her experience as an instructor changed her feelings about the potential benefits of asynchronous communication. While she always recognized the advantages of a graduate degree that
enrolled students from all over the world in that it provided real-world settings for communicating in a
global economy, she had initial concerns about how aspects of her course would translate to the online
environment. But, as she described it, “the translation [to online] worked.” She now regarded the
asynchronous discussions as a major strength, explaining:

I think the idea of the asynchronous learning program or format is really helpful to people in
business because so many aspects of our communication have to happen that way. This is almost
like training ground for our students to be able to apply some of our techniques to their own work
forces, or workplaces, rather.

In reflecting on her role, Bethany was very attuned to the impact of her participation on her
students’ experiences in the online discussions. She also was diligent about how she approached her own
participation in those discussions:

I try to read absolutely every post. Usually, it's a daily event. . . . I also am committed to the idea
that in an online format, the instructor needs to be present, and if they're not, then the student-- it's
a crap shoot whether the student gets the concepts or not. Are they getting their value? Are they
getting the concepts down? . . . It's really critical to me to be a part of the discussion, or maybe
not even a part of the student leaders' discussions. I don't weigh in on those, but I usually have
some kind of discerning comment in the grading process for that week, for each student.

For Bethany, the pedagogical purposes of the discussion were the “confirmation of learning, clarification
of learning, and three, would be rapport-building.”

Barry—Author and instructor of courses other than Course A and Course B

So then I have to go and look at the postings in the forum, and that's a pain. That's a real pain to
me...I have to go and click in [the LMS], click down through the threaded discussions, do all that
kind of stuff. It's very tedious and it's a pain.

Barry was one of the program coordinators and had experience in teaching many of the courses in
the program, both face-to-face and online. He was a self-described “early adopter” of technology, having
been involved in online education since the 1990’s, and regarded the primary benefit of online learning to
be convenience in that “obviously, the real strength is no travel, so logistics is major. Basically, you're
getting folks who couldn't do it any other way, or it would be a real hardship. Less costly.” His
understanding of the program and its purpose was highly pragmatic and based on skill development.
His views on the discussions and their pedagogical role were complex and at times contradictory. On the one hand, he believed that online discussions can be deeper than classroom discussions because “they are really then forced to look at everybody else's genuine comments and hopefully formulate their own thoughts. That doesn't really happen that much in a classroom.” Later, however, when asked his expectations as an instructor pertaining to whether or not students read all of the posts, he remarked that, “I think it's fine scanning the ones relevant to them.”

Similarly, he regarded the quality of the discussions in the program as “fair,” but when then asked why instructors keep threaded discussions in the courses as an activity, he said it was important because there are not alternatives: “We don't have a lot.” He described the strength of the discussions as their technological simplicity: “It's simple. It's still a pain for me to wade through everything, but it's still a pretty simple, reliable method.” His expectations of other instructors in the program were that they scan the posts but do not read them all, as “there's not enough hours in the day to read all that.”

**Jessie—Author and instructor of courses other than Course A and Course B**

There's probably 40% of students that really take the discussion board seriously. They go in, they read other people's posts, they post really thoughtful, intriguing, helpful comments, and really get these discussion strings going. Then there's probably 40% who kind of post their post, and then they go back in once or twice, and make sure they respond to another person, and make sure they answer the questions that were asked of them. And then there's probably 20% that just kind of go in and post their thinking and leave it at that.

Jessie was an adjunct instructor who worked full time for a university other than the one out of which this program is offered. She had a background in online executive programming and had taken and taught online courses prior to the one in this program that she both authored and taught each semester. She offered a nuanced understanding of the learners’ participation in the discussions.

Jessie’s experience with the course discussions was similar to Barry and Robert’s in that she also described them as “very time intensive.” A notable difference, though, was that she also described them as highly rewarding and believed that instructors should actively participate in the discussions and model the desired type of communication and engagement. She acknowledged that many instructors do not see the discussions that way and referenced a colleague who also teaches online who grades students’ quizzes
but does not participate in the discussion forums at all. Jessie was clear on the pedagogical purposes of discussions and regarded their function as similar in the resident and online classroom: “I think they are pretty similar. I think they are really similar in that the face-to-face class that I taught and the online class that I taught, I used discussions in very much the same way: to reinforce learning, to build trust, to connect concepts and theories to real world.”

Jessie described being in the discussions every day, reading all of the posts, and intentionally facilitating responses that encouraged students to go deeper in their thinking. As an example, she asked questions in the discussion forums rather than making statements; as she describes it: “it's trying to pull this thinking out of folks as opposed to just constantly shutting discussions.” Given some feedback she received early in her online teaching and discussion facilitation, Jessie was sensitive to and aware of the impact that her presence had on the students’ experiences: “because I had that first interaction, I still continue to do it because I have that student's voice in my head. I can tell you it's a ton of work and it's a lot of effort....But I know that it makes a difference that I'm in there and my presence in the class.”

**Summary of environing conditions.** While this study focuses on the phenomenon of the asynchronous discussions activity, as discussed in the literature review, this activity is always embedded in and inseparable from its context. The analysis of the program, the two courses, and the instructors’ perspectives was shaped by the underlying research interest of the study: What context might the program, course specifics, and instructor perspectives provide that would aid the understanding of the learners’ experiences in the online discussions? These experiences are a “transaction” that takes place at the intersection of the individual learner and those environing conditions. In the next section, I will provide an overview of each individual learner.

**Participant Cases**

It is in the nature of discussion forum research that all participants will inevitably have some peculiarities to their experiences that are worth considering; at the same time, it is also the case that larger trends can emerge that are worth paying attention to at a more macro level. That is why in this section, I
spend some time highlighting each of the unique participant cases along with the corresponding individuals’ sets of experiences with their discussion forums. Then, in the next chapter, I focus on themes that resonate across participants. The participant profiles and discussion experiences provided here were developed based on the demographic survey, each of the three interviews, and at times the learners’ actual discussion posts, which were referred to for additional context.

In the third interview, “reflections on the meaning,” one of the questions I asked each participant was whether they would include discussion boards if they were designing and teaching for the online program. There was a range of responses, and I used that range in combination with the overall affect of each participant throughout the interviews toward their online course discussion experiences in order to determine the order in which I present the case studies below. I start with the participant who was the most enthusiastic about the discussions and their relation to her learning. When asked if she would include them, she quickly replied “absolutely.” I end with the participant who was the most reflective about the discussions as a disengaging, inauthentic activity, and who, when asked if she would include discussions, explained that she would not include them. The other cases have been intentionally ordered along that continuum of most enthusiastic and positive about the discussions to most critical of them as an activity.

Table 4.4 Participant cases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name*</th>
<th>Demographics**</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Course completion history</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Carmen</td>
<td>44 y/o; F; White</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in PA</td>
<td>Staff Assistant</td>
<td>SP15: Course A SU15: Course B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Russ</td>
<td>49 y/o; M; Asian-Indian</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in PA</td>
<td>Financial Planner</td>
<td>FA14: Course A; Course B SP15: 2 other courses SU15: 2 other courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Abby</td>
<td>29 y/o; F; White</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in PA</td>
<td>Quality Improvement</td>
<td>FA14: Course A; 1 other course SP15: Course B; 1 other course SU15: 2 other courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) Susan</td>
<td>45 y/o; F; White</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in MA</td>
<td>Training Coordinator</td>
<td>FA14: Course A SP15: Course B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) Thomas</td>
<td>48 y/o; M; White</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in PA</td>
<td>Prison Guard (3rd shift)</td>
<td>SP15: Course A; 1 other course NOTE: Not yet taken Course B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name*</td>
<td>Demographics**</td>
<td>Home</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Course completion history</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>45 y/o; F; White</td>
<td>Single no children Lives in MD</td>
<td>Training Manager</td>
<td>SP15: Course A SU15: Course B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>57 y/o; M; Other</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives ½ in PA; ½ in N. Africa</td>
<td>PT as NGO Consultant</td>
<td>SU14: Course A; 1 other course FA14: Course B; 1 other course SP15: 2 other courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adele</td>
<td>51 y/o; F; White-ish</td>
<td>Married w/ children Lives in Western Europe</td>
<td>Executive Coach</td>
<td>FA14: Course A FA14: Course B SP15: 1 other course SU15: 1 other course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Pseudonyms

**All demographic data was self-described

(1) Carmen.

“I think they're necessary. Yes, I think they're very necessary, and as I'm learning now, I might not have thought that before, but now that I see the give and take that we're all getting, especially this semester in our class, I see how much we're all learning from each other, and we're learning the experiences that-- I'm amazed at what we've learned from our classmate in China and how this is in China work as compared to our practices here. I think you're really getting-- even across the country, things are different. So, I think the discussion is good, because it's giving everybody's viewpoints, all these different experiences that they have, and it opens our eyes to somebody like me who's barely been out of central and northeastern Pennsylvania to see how the world is really working and how people are using things and how they're interpreting what they are hearing based on their values, their norms, their environment, all those things. I think discussions are very important.”

Participant profile. Carmen was 44 years old, self-identified as white, worked as a staff assistant, was married, and had children in the home. She seemed quite happy to talk and share her experiences in the program. She also mentioned in her first interview having a new puppy and how that was a major part of their lives over the summer. She spoke about enrolling in the program because she wanted to do something beyond her current employment: “I would have to say, I'm doing the same job as my mother. My mother was a staff assistant for student affairs. . . . So, my big motivator is I don't want to be a staff assistant for student affairs the rest of my life.” Carmen worked at a small organization and an additional factor that led her to pursue this degree was her awareness of the vulnerability of her job and the benefit she saw of having additional credentials if she did need to move into the “business world.”
Carmen was very enthusiastic about her program, though she said she did not have any expectations of it because the topic area was totally new to her. Before this program, she had taken two online courses at another university. In contrast to this program, those classes mostly consisted of residential students taking an online course rather than distributed adult learners enrolled in a completely online program. She had hoped that this program would be more interactive than her previous online experiences. Her biggest surprise thus far with the program was how widely distributed it is, especially the international factor: “I mean, we had somebody from China, we had—I was blown away by then, like, ‘Wow,’ because I hadn't thought we'd have all these people from all over the place, because there's very few of us who are real close to each other.”

Carmen seemed to be a very conscientious student. She explained that if she felt unprepared in an area, she would ask her instructor for additional resources. She printed all of the readings and took notes on everything. She typically did the readings in advance of the lesson starting and intentionally finished the reading before looking at the discussion forum prompt because she did not want to be influenced by it. She described working for three hours a day on her classwork and then spending more time on the weekends. At the point of our interview, she had completed Course A and was enrolled in Course B. In terms of her learning style, she described herself as “neurotic” and “obsessive,” always working ahead, and emphasized the fun she was having with her program: “I'm enjoying being a student. I mean, I try to portray that because I'm having a blast.”

**Discussion forum experiences.** Of all of the participants, Carmen was the most enthusiastic about her discussion forum experiences: “I've got to say, I like the discussion boards, because I like that portion of the group learning. I like getting on there, hearing what people have to say, getting feedback from people.” She described checking the forums daily and seemed to be having an engaged experience in which she felt part of a conversation rather than that she was just completing an assignment. She also seemed to equate the interactivity of her experiences in the program to date with the discussion boards: “My favorite is definitely—I would say the strength is just how much we get to interact with each other. I
really like that on an online, and then that we can do it anytime. Because I have fun when I'm online, 2:00 in the morning, sometimes on the discussion board and some of my classmates are up then too. I also catch some of the people who live in different time zones.”

She was also admittedly in an entirely different industry as a staff assistant and seemed to relish learning from others already working in the field. For Carmen, the most impactful thing about the discussions seemed to be the exposure to new ideas and people that were quite different from her own experiences as someone “who's barely been out of central and northeastern Pennsylvania to see how the world is really working.” She described the discussions as “eye opening” in this regard.

In terms of how she approached her discussions, Carmen was very aware of not wanting to be influenced by the question prompt in terms of her reading. As she described the way that she approached post authoring, it was consistent with most of the other learners’ practices, in terms of opening Word and then “just start answering the question.” She seemed aware of her discussion post as something that was ideally part of something larger:

I would try and phrase my responses - let's see - as something that might elicit more questions from the classmates, so that we can get more of a discussion instead of just, "Boom, here's my thought, that's it." I would put out my thought and then maybe even end with a question, so that people could respond back with answers to them and their thoughts on it - something like that. But I like to give something that makes people think a little bit and makes them want to answer it back.

She was the only participant who confidently stated that she read everybody’s posts. She also approached the discussions from a different perspective than most in that she did not select posts to read based on who posted them, when they were posted, or whether or not they had fewer than two responses.

Some other important ways in which Carmen differed from the other participants were her description of herself as having predominately local experiences, “barely been out of central and northeastern Pennsylvania” and of participating in a program that was “so different from anything I've done.” This came up in terms of how she generated material for her responses; whereas other students who were working in a field more closely related to the curriculum seemed to rely on their experiences to form the response, Carmen drew largely on the reading.
In spite of these differences and her enthusiasm for the discussions—“I love the discussion boards”—when asked directly to reflect on the quality of the discussions given that much of the research purports that students tend to demonstrate low levels of critical thinking in their course discussions she responded that

I would say that's a good assessment in every other class I've had. I wouldn't say there was a tremendous amount of critical thinking. The discussion boards were always sort of going through the motions. But I would say with this one, that's different. We definitely are putting a lot of critical thinking into it. But I would say that that's probably a good assessment from the other three discussion boards I've done in other classes.

The class she described as different, where they were “definitely putting a lot of critical thinking into it” was Course B taught by Bethany. Therefore, when asked in general to describe her discussion experiences, she responded quite positively, but when asked more directly, she used a similar descriptor to others in terms of the discussion experience as “going through the motions.”

(2) Russ.

“*There is almost like this de facto etiquette that I see [in the discussion forums], in the sense that all of the students, we're all in this together there's like a real feeling, we're all experiencing the same thing. We want to get done. The majority of the people on this program are returning adult learners, they've got other lives.*”

**Participant profile.** Russ was 49 years old, self-identified as Indian-American, and worked as an independent financial advisor in the same town in which the main residential campus of the program institution is located. He was originally from Pennsylvania but also spent time in California when he was in the military. Like many adult learners, he attended more than one institution before completing his undergraduate degree. He also described a number of different careers—in the military, as a music promoter, and now as a financial planner. In describing his first undergraduate experience, he talked about being a commuter student and the challenges of that in terms of connecting with other students. He also identified as a disabled veteran (the disability was not acquired in combat but rather on the domestic base itself), which prompted some necessary extensions in course assignments throughout his online program experience to date. Russ was married with one adult son and a daughter in the house. He regarded the strength of online learning, like all of the participants, as its convenience but also spent some time talking
about how “if done correctly” it could actually be a more personal experience than a large anonymous lecture. He described an authentic connection between the program and his life in that he would apply the skills from the program immediately to the fraternity that he advises.

Russ described himself as a “good student,” though at the same time he also talked about not being able to complete much of the assigned reading throughout his courses because of his busy work schedule. Russ’s affect was overall quite positive about everything. As a student and learner he described himself as “tenacious,” regarded himself as “blessed” in spite of the curveballs life had sent him, and talked about his pride at having been inducted to the adult learner honor society on finally completing his undergraduate degree.

One criticism of his online program that Russ mentioned multiple times related to what he experienced as poor written interactions with an instructor who he described as someone who “shouldn’t be teaching.” He found this instructor’s communication style discouraging and repeatedly referenced it in all three of the interviews as a frustrating experience: “And so I think the criticism is just the one course like I said, the personality of the instructor was very detailed, very stoic, non-interactive unless he had to and that's difficult in this environment.” This was a theme throughout Russ’s interviews in terms of his desires to connect in meaningful ways with his classmates and his instructors: “I am somebody, especially as an adult learner, who would seek out people to talk to them and create dialogue. That is something that was somewhat important to me. So I would speak to my instructors, fellow students, whatnot.” As indicated above, this personal connection was something that Russ mentioned multiple times throughout our interviews: “I think sometimes, if you have the wrong instructor who does not interact or gives one word or two word email answers to a guy like me who's expressive, it's really hard. I think that's a weakness.”

*Discussion forum experiences.* Russ talked about logging into the course multiple times throughout the week, always starting his sessions by checking for any communication from the instructor in his email. Russ approached and experienced his discussions through the lens that he described the
entirety of his academic career: that of relational connections. More than once he talked about the
discussion experience with his peers by saying “we’re all in this together.” His approach to completing
his initial post was consistent with that of his classmates in that he would go to a word processing
program and read through the prompt:

I'm thinking basically, I'm applying what I already know, I'm applying what I just read, I'm
looking at the transcript that's off to my side, if there's anything that Dr. [professor's name] has
kind of pointed us to in this area. I keep re-reading this area here, the actual question, to make
sure that I'm fully understanding what the point is here.

Based on his participation patterns description, Russ made his initial post before reading those of
any of his classmates. After drafting his initial post in an external word processing program, he would
copy it and then go into the discussion forum itself in the LMS. As an example of his highly relational
way of understanding most of the components in his course, Russ described the discussion space as
follows: “now, open up the discussion forum, here are my team members, all the people that are making
discussions.” Russ discussed that conflict might emerge in the discussions and approached it as something
to be mitigated and explained that he had communicative strategies he applied in the discussions that were
“a really soft way of redirecting them to me making my point without them making them feel terrible.”
He talked multiple times throughout the interviews about the potential for conflict in the forums, the fact
that they were “all in this together,” and that people who approached disagreement from an argumentative
stance were perhaps not communicating appropriately within the context of the established etiquette: “I
think the case that I had was somebody kind of jumped into the conversation, and in the manner that they
did, their language was very contrary. It was contrary to the person's opinion. So right away there's
potential for conflict. In the manner that they made their opposition known was not polite.” Similarly, he
expressed that, “That's a real soft approach to be able to get your opinion out, you validate somebody's.
You're not alienating that person right out the chute like that example that I just said. The words, ‘I
disagree,’ right out the chute. It's in your face kind of like, ‘Whoa.’ That sort of ‘Wow, you disagree.’
And that's not a good feeling.”
Russ felt much of the onus for quality learning in a course was the responsibility of the instructor: “I think the critical thinking is a responsibility of the instructor to elicit. I think that the student is only as good as the instructor.” He often contrasted how he viewed what the instructor did (or did not do) with his own teaching style. He contrasted the way one could see the discussion as “just an email” with the way he intentionally viewed it as relational and authentic: “When it comes to the discussion forums, I think it's pretty easy. You have to feel comfortable, you have to feel like there—for me, I set it up like they're in the same room as me and there is truly an interaction.” Russ’s descriptions of his experiences in and his understanding of the purpose of the discussion forums was positive overall: “I think discussion forums are great. I think it gives us an opportunity to be prompted, to really think, and it gives us a stage to think at a higher level.”

In spite of the fact that Russ spoke quite positively about the discussions, and of all the participants except for Carmen seemed to have the most authentic sense of being part of an actual learning community or team, in the two courses where I looked at the posts themselves, he actually participated quite minimally compared to his classmates. For example, in Course A, he never met the weekly requirements in terms of deadlines or number of responses. When we did the stimulated recall in interview two, Russ explained that his posts were somewhat unique in that he worked with the instructor to get extensions because of the back pain caused by his disability.

(3) Abby.

*I think discussion is necessary, I think it's validating too. I think that to put into words, things that you're thinking, re-enforces the concepts that you're learning, and it kind of makes you feel like, "I get it," that you can have a coherent thought on whatever the topic is. So in that way I think it's validating...I think I'm pretty diligent, I go on and check the discussion boards every day... lots of times people are just pretty much like, "Oh that's a great post, that's a great thought," but it's nice to have the validation that people are reading your posts.*

Participant profile. Abby was 29 years old, self-identified as white, lived in Pennsylvania, was married, and had a stepson who lived in the house part time. She worked full time as a quality improvement coordinator for a non-profit organization. She had been at her job for many years, describing it as “pretty much the job that I got right out of college.” She was enrolled in this program for
potential career growth since, as she described it, “at my work if you can get a master’s degree, you
can move up. If you don't have a master’s degree there's positions that are just not available to you,
because they say master’s degree required.” Additionally, she also clarified that even without that
pragmatic motivation she was still benefiting from the program because “I think it's stuff that's applicable,
even if I couldn't move up and stayed in my current position, it's stuff that I could use to make where I
work better, because I love the company that I work for. . . I feel like this degree is something that gives
me at least some ability to change the function in a positive way.”

She did not originally plan to enroll in an online program, and this was her first online
experience, but after searching for programs in this general area, she found it offered online and decided
to enroll. She did not have many specific expectations of the program but did think there would be more
synchronous communication. She described herself as a Type A student, diligent, and that she
liked to work ahead. She found the speed with which she got grades and feedback online “validating.” She had a
fairly structured weekly schedule and did course work both at home and from her office. She printed all
of her lessons, as she thought it was easier to flip through her pages, she managed her weekly assignments
and readings on a Google calendar, and she checked the discussion forums daily.

**Discussion forum experiences.** At first Abby found the threaded asynchronous discussions hard
to understand but became comfortable with them: “I didn't understand the discussion forum concept when
we first started doing it, I totally get it now.” She also got validation from the discussions, both by
articulating her own reflections and by having others read and comment on her posts. She mentioned
multiple times that she checked the discussions daily. For the most part, Abby spoke positively of class
discussions and felt they are necessary for learning for concept clarification and getting a variety of
perspectives on things: “it's interesting to read other peoples comments on the discussion board though. I
do like to do that and comment on things.”

Abby had clear expectations about how people should participate in the discussions, and these
tied in with her beliefs about the purpose of discussion. For example, while she saw the benefit of
productive disagreement, she also regarded one other student’s confrontational approach as very frustrating: “Every once in a while though you get someone who's like—there's this one guy who's really negative, and he writes weird things in his responses. . . A couple of his stuff really pissed me off and I wanted to respond inappropriately, but I used restraint and didn't.” Of all of the participants, Abby also seemed most frustrated by the asynchronous nature of the discussions and the fact that people would post very late in the week, affecting her ability to respond.

I mean maybe I'm just one of those people who gets annoyed when I feel like other people in the class don't do the same amount of work that I do. But, I feel like there's people who go on the discussion board, the last day - we have a week that our assignments are due within that week time frame, literally they'll go on the last day. So you're putting extra work on me because I have to go on the last day as well, just to comment on your discussion thing and then by that point I really don't feel like it.

Abby also discussed being very aware of whether or not students responded to her posts, titling her posts intentionally so that she “can see easier when people are responding to my things. If I just put coaching as the title of the post then it could be anybody writing about coaching when it comes up in the discussions. So I always put coaching [my name].” She spoke a lot about the validation she got from responses and that “lots of times people are just pretty much like, ‘Oh that's a great post, that's a great thought,’ but it's nice to have the validation that people are reading your posts.” Similarly, Abby was also very aware of how many responses she got, saying that when she got a lot of replies, “I guess I feel like I said something interesting. Sometimes you do get a lot of replies. A lot more than other people so makes you think, ‘Oh, I must have said something really interesting.’"

While Abby was relatively positive overall about her discussion experiences, when asked directly about the quality of the discussions overall, she quickly responded, “I feel like most of them are kind of low quality.” She also discussed believing that the discussion experience could be improved, but she did not have a sense of how to improve it. Abby was also the most outspoken about the impact of self-censorship on the quality of the discussions. When asked about the discussions’ overall low quality, she explained that it was ultimately due to the politeness and political correctness people used to constrain their communication that kept them from being more engaging and more interesting.
(4) Susan.

And a discussion can happen over a variety of days depending on when people log in, and then honestly, if you're going to get the best experience of it, you should probably...it's tough. Because if you log in too early, then there's not enough people participating yet that you are going to get a lot of responses. So it's really the onus is on you to go back in and see, but I think it's kind of challenging because people are busy, and not everyone is logged in at the same time. . . .The way that I typically approach the discussion is I'm checking off the box to make sure that I've satisfied the criteria for the week. So it's really not a discussion quite honestly. It's more post your question and then you're done.

Participant profile. Susan was 45 years old, self-identified as white, married, and with an 8 year old daughter. She was a self-described “weekend warrior,” worked full time for a large corporation and described the core function of her job as relationship building. Like many online adult learners, her undergraduate experience had time breaks (sometimes years at a time), and she attended multiple institutions. She finished her degree at a large, online for-profit and said that while she “loved the education she got there” she has been “embarrassed by the name” since graduating. This was one of the factors that influenced her selection of her current online master’s program and university in that she wanted “a name that was respected.” She had started in another master’s program at the same university and then switched to this one.

At the time of her interviews with me, she had completed both Course A and Course B and compared them quite often in her responses, most frequently with regard to the personalities and facilitating styles of her two respective instructors. My early conversation with her about the marked differences in her experiential perspective regarding the two courses was one of the original prompts that I should consider each course in more detail. Susan also often compared her experiences in her current online program to her undergraduate online program with a different university. She felt that her undergraduate program was better structured and forced her to be more engaged with the material, the process, and the discussions.

Susan approached her work pragmatically and did the reading, both the external assigned reading and the specific lesson content, only when she was unable figure out the activities from the prompts and
what she gleaned from the approach of other students. In her courses she was most excited by the material that she could immediately apply in her workplace. She epitomized the pragmatic motivation characteristic of many working adult learners:

[I]t's all the same resources that we're tapping as an organization right now, so it just felt comfortable, and it felt like something that I could leverage, as opposed to going into the book, and reading the content, and taking a quiz. I could take what [instructor] gave me and immediately apply it to my job, which was huge. I think that's why I got so excited about it. Because I was like, "Oh, I just learned about this," so I was helping real-work problems I was contributing to based on what I learned in class the night before.

She started each week by looking at what was due for that week and then proceeded from there. She also described herself as Type A and wanted to see that she was getting A’s

Discussion forum experiences. Regarding the discussion forums specifically, Susan described them more than once as an activity to “check off.” At the same time, she said she would not get rid of them because they were the only place in the course where students had the opportunity to learn from each other. When asked whether or not all courses in the program should have them, she thought for a while and then reflected that if,

[Y]ou remove the discussions, and then I go to the class and I don't know anything about my . . . You're going to get to your team cohorts then and you know nothing about anybody on there. So at least, the discussions give you a glimpse of maybe how a person thinks. But if you took that away, you're missing the diversity piece of the whole class learning from one another.

She would prefer to make them synchronous, and if they could not be synchronous—because she acknowledged this would take away from the flexibility of work schedules with people all over the country—she would require learners to submit videos so they could better get to know each other.

As I said above, Susan was the most enthusiastic about Bethany’s style, both with facilitating the discussions and Course B as a whole. She described her as a “ray of sunshine,” “an absolute peach,” and “patient and nurturing.” She spoke very positively about the structure of Course B, the content, and the design of the discussions where the students facilitated them. When asked about the quality of critical thinking her discussions, she said that it was low in Course A but that in Course B that she “absolutely was using critical thinking skills and what have you to answer the questions and participate in a
dialogue.” That said, when asked to rank her class activities in terms of impact on her learning, she put discussions at the bottom for both of the courses she’d taken, Course A and Course B, as the least impactful of all of the activities for her. Consistent with this, she felt that the discussions were potentially “very valuable, but the current state is not a value add.” She felt that because of how the discussions were weighed in the class, around 10%, that in the overall course context discussions were therefore not that important of an activity.

Susan had a very intentional strategy for how she engaged in the discussions that she explained and demonstrated in the stimulated recall interview. Before she created her own initial post she would always go in and read the posts of two specific classmates. With the first of the classmates, she found herself “annoyed” by the style but still learned from the content: “I didn't necessarily love her style, so I like to put my on imprint on it as well. I like to take her expertise, but then apply it back to whatever the lesson summary is and try to put in in my setting, in my world.” And, she described the second, “She's smarter and she's more conservative in how she approaches situations. So I've learned a lot from [student name] personally.” After reading both of those students’ responses, Susan explained that if “I still felt like, ‘Okay, I'm not getting this,’ or, ‘I want clarity,’ I would then go back and see what [instructor name’s] summary was and try to marry the three and then answer in my own perspective.” While a couple of other students read other posts before creating their own, Susan was the most intentional with her approach in terms of which posts she read and how she drew the sources of information together to develop her “own perspective.” While some might regard Susan’s approach to crafting her own posts as more passive since she looked at other’s “answers” before her own, when considered within a framework of collaborative knowledge construction, of all the participants, she was actually most aware of learning through her classmates rather than the discussion forum being a space of individual reflection and cognition.

(5) Thomas.
That's what the course people who create these courses need to keep in mind is you need the steer this course. You can't just put it in cruise control and hit the end and say, okay, great job, everybody, see you next time. The discussion board is the same way, you got to steer them.

**Participant profile.** Thomas was 48 years old, self-identified as white, married with children in the home, and lived and worked in Pennsylvania. He worked 3rd shift as a prison guard and was pursuing this degree as he contemplated “what’s next” as he headed toward retiring from his current position. Thomas was quite enjoyable to talk to, spoke very bluntly, and also used a lot of metaphors and analogies, which made his descriptions quite colorful. As a learner, Thomas described himself as someone who has long been interested in a number of different areas and had actually just the semester before starting this program completed a different online master’s from the same university. He explained that, “essentially if I could be a professional student for the rest of my life, I'd choose that.” At the same time, he also mentioned in each interview that he would not major in something that required him to learn another language. As he put it “I'm not interested in any foreign language. I speak English, I talk English. I don't want anything to do with the foreign languages. Sorry, doesn't float my boat.” He had completed all of his degrees, including his initial associate’s degree, from the same university through their distance education/online organization. When he first enrolled, he took paper-based correspondence courses and now was taking fully online asynchronous courses in his current master’s program. He was previously in the Navy and described participating in a number of day-long trainings and workshops in that environment.

As a learner, Thomas described himself as a “huge proactive individual” and prided himself on working ahead in his lessons, tracking assignments carefully, and printing and taking notes on all materials. At the same time, he often skipped the assigned reading, explaining: “Again, that's another big thing is, if it's something that I've already done, something I've already seen, something I already have experienced with, I don't even look at it. Some of these books, I've never even opened, which is kind of a shame, but some I might have never even open it.” He also expressed frustration with instructors that “lot of times, this right here, kind of irritates me. When I see a course where an instructor throws tons of
reading at you, it really irritates me. Like they'll throw five PDFs at you, ranging anywhere from 1 page to 60 pages. They could throw five of them at you, and then they want you to read three chapters, two chapters, whatever, in the book. It's a little ridiculous. So as soon as I start seeing stuff like this right here, reading two chapters, I kind of get pissed off.”

Discussion forum experiences. Thomas’s described his discussion experiences as both positive and negative and felt that the quality truly depended on each individual discussion. For example:

When you get a whole bunch of people that don't want to be involved with the discussion, the discussion board basically goes flat. It's almost lifeless, you know what I mean?

At the same time, he described the specific requirements as not impacting his approach to the discussions and his participation really depending on his interest in the topic.

Most of the courses require you to respond to say two people. It says that you have to respond to at least two other classmates by such and such a time, and reply to their responses to you. A lot of time the minimum criteria is established for you. That plays no role whatsoever with me. I think that is just something that they do to ensure that everybody does something. But it has no bearing on me because I enjoy talking to other people. I enjoy going over a content - what I've experienced, what they've experienced, how they relate. I would say depending on the content of the discussion, I could reply hundreds of times. (emphasis added)

As a point of context, in the course I had access to for Thomas, which was Course A since he had not yet taken Course B, he had 41 posts total for the 6 discussion forums throughout the course, while the average number of posts in this course was 25.

Thomas’s approach to discussions, like Susan’s and unlike most of the other participants, was to read other posts before beginning to draft his own. As he described it, “So I will read the forums and determine A, whether they are replying to what's being asked, whether I think what they've posted is applicable. So I'm trying to critique what they've written. I'm trying to understand what they've written, and I'm trying to think of how I'm going to reply based on how these people are replying.” Thomas evaluated the quality of the discussions by the number of posts. He also remarked that the quality of the discussions really varied by course and the types of people in there and that in some courses they could be great and in others “they’re a waste of time.”
Thomas, like the majority of the participants, described his posting in terms of his own feelings and experiences and less in terms of the content of the course itself: “if it's something I feel very important, very strongly about, it's going to be a post to about how I feel about it, not necessarily what the topic is in terms of what I've read or not, what other people have said, but how I feel about it.” Thomas was like most of the other participants in that he seemed to view the purpose as experience and perspective sharing. John, who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, was the only participant who approached the discussion very intentionally as a way to pull together readings and make some sort of argument.

When asked to compare his discussion forum experiences to face-to-face discussion and social media, Thomas did not see any real overlap with face-to-face and emphasized big differences between his Facebook experiences in that he lacked any authentic connection with his classmates:

If I have any discussion with you on discussion board, you don't know me from Adam. Maybe you've seen my name on a couple posts. You don't know what I'm like. You don't know what I think is funny. You don't know what I think. You don't know when I'm serious. The people that I deal on Facebook do know, so, yeah, there's a lot of difference. I could say something on Facebook and it could just be words and my friends get it. My friends know exactly what I'm talking about, whether it's an inference, you know what I mean, so, yeah, there's a little lot of difference.

Like a number of the other students, Thomas emphasized multiple times the role of the instructor and his perception of the lack of instructor participation in the discussions and how that negatively impacted his experiences. Thomas was highly aware of the demotivating impact of what he experienced as his instructors’ lack of involvement. When asked the final question of the third interview—“what is the most important thing you want your instructors to learn from this research about your course discussion experiences?”—he responded with an immediate one-word response: “involvement.” He went on to explain how the role of the instructor facilitation is crucial to the success of the discussion. Notably, two months after the interviews were completed, Thomas sent me a personal email with a screen shot comparing two different discussions explaining that he “wanted to take a minute to provide you with an example of what I was telling you during our interview sessions. Attached are screen captures of our
discussion boards for this week for two of my courses. Both are taken at the same point in time under the same criteria. You will see the stark contrast with and without instructor involvement. :)

(6) Mary.

To me a chat room or Facebook, that kind of dialogue is five or six people in a circle at a party, and we're all talking about the same topic. And it continues, and it builds off of each other, and it's a group dynamic. The discussion rooms are like, if you took that same party but you divided all five or six of us into pairs, and we were having four or five different discussions, but there was no interplay between the group over there, and the group over there, and the group over there. That's more to me what the discussion group's like.

Participant profile. Mary was a 45 year old, self-identified white female who worked full time in a large corporation as a training manager. She worked and lived in Baltimore, MD, was single and did not have children. She enrolled in the program out of a desire to take her career “to the next level.” She received a tuition reimbursement from her company for her education. The program was highly relevant to her current work, and she saw the degree as a next step in her career. Her biggest challenge with the online program was that she “worked more than a 40 hour week.”

Mary had taken a number of different professional development courses over the years, some for credit and others as workshops. She even started a different residential program but was then promoted and had to move. She had also previously taken some courses at a different online university and was disappointed with what she experienced as a lack of interaction with the instructor in those courses. Therefore, before enrolling in this program she found out more about the various modalities for content and interaction. She commented positively on the integration of videos, group projects, and other interactive activities as appealing to her about this program. Mary was highly reflective and generally paused before responding in the interview in order to make sure that she had understood the question. She also took great care to explain herself clearly. She was very precise with her descriptions of her experiences, and her consistent attention to detail, such as the party analogy quoted above, helped give me a much richer understanding of what her experiences were like for her. At the point of our interview, she had completed Course A and was enrolled in Course B.
Mary described herself as a constant learner and a hands-on experiential learner and said that she was “somebody who was engaged with learning something new, that I love to learn new things, so that motivates me and makes me happy. However, I'm somebody who struggles to fit everything in on a normal weekly basis.” She explained that she worked a more than 40-hour a week job and that made it difficult to do her classwork as well. I gleaned from our stimulated recall, wherein she demonstrated her approach to each week, that she was quite diligent about her work and proceeded in a fairly linear manner—for example, doing the required reading first and then moving on to her discussion assignment.

**Discussion forum experiences.** Mary explained that she did not have many preconceived notions about what the discussion experiences would be like other than “I figured we'd be talking about whatever topic we were covering in class.” Overall, she did not evaluate her online discussion experiences very positively in terms of her learning, though she did see discussions in face-to-face classes as a definite “value add.” She described the requirement to participate as a form of “busy work” that would not be a factor if she were in a “bricks and mortar program.” Her overall experiences of online discussions both in this program and in her experiences at another institution were that “because it's not like you're chatting with each other, it's, you know, you might put something out there and someone'll respond to you like two days later and then maybe two days later you respond to them, and then well, you're on to the next topic the following week. So there's not really much of a synergy there in my experience.”

It was not that Mary saw no value in the discussions, just that in the way she had experienced them thus far, both in this program and her previous online experiences, she felt that a “real conversation” never really took place. While some like Susan and Carmen really enjoyed the blogging component of the courses and found it more impactful than the discussions, for Mary, there was not much of an experiential difference between the two mediums. She described feeling a more authentic engagement in the small group discussion where she and her groupmates were working together on writing a case study analysis.

In creating her initial post, she worked to process the question prompt in order to “understand where they are coming from.” In drafting her response, she was aware of her audience as the instructor
and fellow students and she was attentive to her tone in that “I write in a more conversational tone, because I don't write very formal, because my idea is that this is a discussion. So instead of basically talking out loud, I'm trying to basically use that conversational tone to put it in writing for discussion.” She did not shy away from raising counter viewpoints but was very sensitive to language and framing things in such a way as to not be combative. Overall, she evaluated the discussions as her “least impactful learning method.” That said, she would not get rid of them from the program but would redesign them to be focused on individual students communicating directly with the professor about topics, where others could read the exchanges but would not be required to comment. She articulated the most important thing she would want her instructors to learn from this research regarding online discussion experiences as “That from my perspective, I understand what they're trying to affect with the discussions, but I don't think it's having the effect that they want it to have.”

(7) John.

You can't call it a lesson and put it in discussion forum, you can't say, "Do this, and this, and this, and then submit it to the discussion." Because, well, there is no discussion, and I think that the fundamental critical point of this whole program working is that discussion needs to be essentially between the student and the professor. People have the right to comment on that, but this idea that send two comments slaughtering your friends or you're going to fail the weekly discussion requirements, it doesn't challenge people, it doesn't provoke people, and that I think that discussion should be in a way that the professor actually measures a person's grasp of the concept for the week and either corrects that student if their understanding is flawed in some way, or encourages that student if their critique is on point. So that what happens is that the discussion can be off point or it could be very—just sterile, like copy and paste the answer...But what discussion really means is something that you have to get a little bit deeper into this and say, "What is this process we call discussion really about?" It isn't just like groupthink. It isn't just like, "Oh, yeah that's great. That's a great thought. I liked what you said." We can flatter each other all day, and I'm not the one who wants to just be stuck on disagreeing. But I think that what I would say is through my experience the real dilemma in this is this group think process...That's the purpose of discussion, is to allow for all this divergence, to encourage this divergence and the professor has to be the one who is evaluating that. Not just checking to see whether you made a comment and whether you responded to two of your colleagues...And that you get perhaps rewarded for critical analysis rather than just perhaps marginalized as though, "Well, we don't need to open a debate here. That's not really going to affect my grade."

Participant profile. John was 57 years old, self-identified racially as other, was married, had children in the home part-time, and worked part-time. Of all of the participants, he was the only one who worked part-time; the rest all worked full time. While this program was his first experience taking online
courses, his two children went to virtual schools growing up, and he felt the experience of guiding them through that education influenced how he approached his current online program. He was originally from Pennsylvania but had spent significant blocks of time over the last 10 years working as an NGO consultant in a North African country. His motivation for the program was in part to gain more practical knowledge for his job and also because the country in which he works had a high regard for higher education degrees and he felt it would lend him more credibility in his role. John was highly analytical and direct, though not negative, about his views on all aspects of the program: from what he experienced as a lack of true diversity, to its replication rather than transformation model in terms of online design, to the communicative tendencies that he referred to multiple times as “groupthink,” to the discussions specifically.

He had also given all of these ideas considerable thought prior to the interviews, which meant that his responses to all of the questions were quite elaborate and at times very broad. At times, our interviews would get so far off topic and focus veering into his perspectives on cultural norms that I would have to quite directly draw us back to questions at hand. It was extremely challenging to get him to answer any questions directly—he would typically disregard a relatively straightforward question and instead respond with his thoughts about another issue entirely. I sometimes had to ask questions multiple times in order to ascertain what his personal experiences were, not just what he regarded as overall cultural norms or trends. All that said, he was very nice, expressed enjoying the time to talk with me and being able to articulate these views, and he followed up with me a few times after the interviews to share additional feedback.

Discussion forum experiences. When we started discussing the discussion forum experience specifically, John was extremely outspoken as to what he experienced as a lack of critical thinking throughout the discussions. He was very much a minority in his approach in that where others were careful not to offend, he viewed his role as being “provocative” and used this specific term repeatedly throughout our interviews. Whereas the program itself and the instructors emphasized the pragmatic
benefits of skill development and experience sharing, John very much wanted the discussions to be a site for critical engagement.

I want to make the discussion more meaningful. To do that involves a certain amount of provocation sometimes, criticism. That may be about somebody's point of view. It may be to express my own point of view. But the critical component, that's what makes the course satisfying to me.

In this approach, he stood out from the beginning as approaching the discussions from a significantly different perspective from the other participants. He described the low levels of critical thinking in the discussions as endemic of Western culture. While he was a bit of an outlier among the participants in this study regarding his intentionally provocative stance, this argumentative approach is certainly documented in the literature. In Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) small qualitative study, they found a similar minority that viewed the discussions as a place for debate whereas the others viewed them as a place for relationship building and/or experience sharing. Just as, in their group of five participants, Rourke and Kanuka (2007) had one who viewed it as a site for debate, in my group of eight participants, I had one who viewed it similarly.

In describing and demonstrating how he typically approached his discussions, John took the discussion prompt as posted in the lesson and then looked for keywords from the question. When available, he read the texts on a Kindle and then did a search on those keywords in order to determine quotations for his answer. He intentionally approached the discussion for the provocative comment, rather than—I think that there's probably two ways you could go. I don't try to critique and I don't just try to satisfy the question. I look at the provocative approach.” He tended to make arguments with his posts, using many direct quotations from the lesson and the external reading to support his case. John’s was much more of a rhetorical engagement with the concepts than an experiential reflection, which was how the rest of the participants tended to describe their approaches: “I would just put in my post, and I would make my general argument. Then I would look for references directly from the text that support that.” He felt that people needed to go beyond the practice and wrestle with the underlying theory but also recognized that was not the predominant approach to these discussions. The
challenge for John was that nobody else seemed to be participating that way or took his input in the vein in which he intended it. In fact, another learner in the group of participants identified posts of his specifically as unnecessarily incendiary and argumentative. He experienced himself as being “silenced” because of his approach as encouraging dissent and disagreement.

Like the others, John recognized that the discussion participation could be mechanistic: “That's sort of the challenge of this discussion, is that you don't get any points for thinking too hard. You can copy and paste from the outline, the summary, and more or less copy and paste that in a Word document, and reformat a little bit and nobody's going to mark you off for not submitting that discussion.” He was also consistent with many of the others, in that he did not tend to read the other posts until he had made his initial post.

(8) Adele.

I was and continue to be underwhelmed by this method of interaction...As I look at this I'm amused, because I can almost guarantee you that I have no input past when I posted. Yeah. And here's everybody doing their two posts. This feels like ticking the box to me. This feels like, we all knew we had to post.

Participant profile. Adele was 51 years old, self-identified as white-ish. She was a United States citizen who lived and worked in a Western European country with her husband and two teenage children. Adele worked as faculty at an international company doing communications coaching for Fortune 500 executives. She recently began the MPS program as well as starting a new job; as she described it, her “MO is to take on too much...it’s just tons on my plate.” She stood out in her current position in that typically she would be required to already have a master’s degree. Part of her motivation for the program was the monetary incentive in that her salary would increase by 10,000 euros once she completed the degree. She was also inherently interested in the curriculum and explained that she was “curious about how things work and how they don't work and why they don't work. And what the evolution of these things is.” She was always interested in an online distance program, as she did not want to relocate for school. Adele was highly aware of her learning preferences and whether or not she was enjoying her learning. She was very high energy and extremely self-reflective, and of the eight student participants, she
was the most aware of her learning practices and preferences, and described herself as “a constant learner: avid, curious, constantly making connections, constantly trying to understand linkages, extrapolating a lot to things that I do feel like I understand.”

This program was her first experience with online learning, and it was important to her that the program be reputable, and while the program met that expectation, she did clarify that “to be perfectly honest, I'm enough of a snob that I would have taken a more Ivy name if I could have gotten it.” While this was her first experience with online learning, Adele had worked for a company before as a qualitative marketing researcher, and she herself had moderated several asynchronous online focus groups wherein she would spend hours each day facilitating conversations among customers about their experiences. This background gave her points of comparison when we spoke during the third interview about how the discussions might work better if redesigned.

In terms of how she structured her week, Adele described her approach as being like “a freaking hamster, like I have to keep doing stuff every night, which is terrible, because when I like the class, I love it, and I love doing the reading and I wish I were doing it full-time. But when I hate the class, I'm so relieved that it's just like, ‘Okay, I can probably get all of this done in three or four hours, and then it'll be done.’” She explained that while she didn’t have a lot of clear expectations for the program, she had been surprised by all of the group work; as she described the downside of online learning: “Anyway, the downside, if there were no group interaction, there would be many fewer downsides, because I would just do my readings and I would take my test and I'd be very happy.” During the first interview, Adele conflated group work with discussions, and that was a point of clarification I had to make. She consistently made connections between the required textbook reading and workplaces: “I get to do the reading, and I learn stuff and it's neato. And I think about stuff that I've done and I'm like, oh that's why this was so I'd up. Or, oh what if we had tried that? That might have worked, or whatever.” She was also extremely engaged throughout the interview process and was quite funny and direct with her reflective, honest feedback.
**Discussion forum experiences.** Adele was highly reflective about her discussion experiences and did not find them to be very meaningful. As she described it, “I was and continue to be underwhelmed by this method of interaction.” At the same time, of all of the participants, upon reflection during the interviews, Adele seemed most bothered by her lack of authentic connection with her classmates—she contrasted the lack of relationships she was experiencing with her peers in the discussions to “real relationships” explaining:

“[I]t's so bad that I don't even know who they are, but I know that I'm dismissing it. That's pathetic to me. That just doesn't feel very human to me. That's not my best self...half the time I don't remember the names of these people that are in my class. I don't know what their names are. I have no idea what their life looks like. Honestly, I don't really care. And if I think about that, it makes me a little bit sad, because that's not really who I am. I'd rather have a real relationship with someone.”

Adele clearly craved meaningful connections and relationships with her classmates that arguably, at least in part, should have been taking place in the discussions. Before starting the program, she did expect that interactions with classmates and the instructor would be synchronous, using some sort of web conferencing, referring to our interview modality in saying “I guess I had kind of made some assumptions about interaction. Well, mostly the way you and I are interacting right now, because that's how I interact with people at work, who are far away. We have Skype calls, we'll talk on the phone, we can IM. I think in my mind's eye, I imagined that that would be how it was.”

When asked how her experience in the threaded discussions compared to writing a paper, she explained that, “It's very consistent from a discussion board like this, where this to me looks like my deliverable for this week. So when I think it's a deliverable, I write it properly or what I think of as properly.” This again demonstrated her experience of the discussions as an isolated activity, like writing a paper, rather than a collaborative, communicative activity like a Skype conversation. Similarly, consistent with most other students she did not want to read other posts before her own as, “I didn't really want to be influenced by anybody. I wanted to think through what I wanted to think through, and then post it.” In spite of her overall negative affect toward the discussions, Adele was quite diligent in how she
approached them. She showed me the highlighting in her books and how she would go back through the reading, sometimes re-reading, in order to formulate her response to the discussion prompt.

She repeatedly referenced the discussion forum as a “deliverable” and the action of posting and commenting on her two classmates as “tick[ing] off the box.” She also, as we were doing a stimulated recall, looked at the discussion as a whole and commented while laughing on “everybody doing their two posts. This feels like ticking the box to me. This feels like, we all knew we had to post.” She spoke with frustration about the lack of authentic connection she felt with her classmates—as she experienced it, the LMS interface really limited her ability to even know with whom she was communicating. As if to make her conclusive statement about her discussion experiences overall, she mentioned more than once being very happy to be currently enrolled in a course that did not require discussions: “And I have to say, Andrea, I do not miss it. Oh, my God. I so don't miss it.”

**Summary**

Recognizing that learners’ experiences always take place at the intersection of context and the individual, this chapter first presented the context for the learners’ experiences—the course analyses and instructor cases—and then looked at individual learners with a focus on their “personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities” (Dewey, 1938, p. 44). The next chapter will explore the themes that existed across individual participants pertaining to their experiences with online course discussions. Clearly all the participants were unique and had dimensions of experience particular to them as individuals, yet it is also the case that from an analysis perspective, some themes pertaining to experience were present across cases. These themes can help identify potential design and facilitation interventions toward the end of ultimately improving discussion quality.
Chapter 5

Themes Across Cases

It should now be clear from the participant cases described in the previous chapter that this was a relatively diverse group of individuals, bringing their own diverse sets of expectations and past experiences to their current program and having unique sets of experiences in their asynchronous online course discussions. That said, it is also the case that some themes resonated across individual participant cases, and these themes are worth discussing in more depth. Toward that end, these themes have been intentionally ordered to tell a story about these learner experiences when the participants are considered as a collective rather than individually. If the previous chapter spoke to who these learners were as individuals, then this chapter attempts to speak first to how they experienced their discussions; second, to why they had that set of experiences; and third, to what they valued about their discussion experiences.

More specifically, through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), it was found that the participants, even those more positive about their course discussions, tended to regard the activity as an experience unique to the online course environment and one that was a mostly low quality deliverable, wherein they were often “going through the motions” in their participation. Some potential explanations for these types of experiences were (1) a lack of consistent instructor presence; (2) the ways in which the requirements shaped their participation; (3) factors inherent to asynchronous, recorded, written communication; and (4) the limitations of the discussion forum user interface itself. In spite of all of this, all but one of the participants would keep the discussions as an activity and described valuing the opportunities they provided for social connections, idea articulation, and collaborative group processes.

**HOW Are Learners Experiencing Their Online Course Discussions?**

**Unique to asynchronous online course contexts.** While much of the research literature considers online education only within the paradigm of the face-to-face classroom (Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, Tamim, 2011), when asked directly to “describe the experience of participating in an online course discussion to a friend,” not a single participant compared the experience to that of a
synchronous class discussion. For these participants, their experiences in asynchronous course
discussions were somewhat like email, Facebook, or writing a paper, not much like face-to-face
classroom discussion, and often hard to compare to other experiences. For example, Abby and Adele
initially compared the experience to social media:

[S]omeone posts something and then people respond to it. I mean I think most people understand
that because of social media. (Abby)

If you've used Facebook recently, you'll see. I post something and then Andrea comments on it,
and then it turns out I have a question about what Andrea said, so I can reply to it, but then
somebody else could independently respond to my original post. (Adele)

Susan, Russ, and Mary initially described the experience in terms of email.

It reminds me a lot of e-mail. And what I mean by that is, the page will load up, you're basically
responding to an e-mail, or it looks like your e-mail, but you're responding to like a post. (Susan)

So the online discussion is kind of like emailing back and forth. . . . It's kind of email on steroids I
guess, if you want to say that. But there is no-- it is wide open to everybody who has anything to
do with the course. (Russ)

[I]t is more like responding to email that other people just happen to be able to see versus other
kinds of media that might have discussions. It's more like an email exchange back and forth.
(Mary)

For Carmen, the experience was hard to compare to anything else.

I don't think there's anything that quite compares to it. . . . I don't know if there's anything that I'd
really compare it to. (Carmen)

As Burbules (1993) explained, “it is an important feature of dialogue that it can phase in and out
of any singular pattern, as the participants shift their approaches in response to each other” (p. 7). And
that

What underlies and shapes the patterns of interaction in a dialogue are the attitudes, emotions,
and expectations that participants have regarding each other and the value of the dialogue itself;
these are formed partly out of the dynamic of interaction as the discussion moves along. What
sustains a dialogue over time is not only lively interchange about the topic at hand, but a certain
commitment to one’s partner. (p. 15)

Given that the focus of this study was on learners’ experiences—including “attitudes, emotions,
and expectations” (p. 15)—we should also attend to the learners’ affective descriptions of the online
course discussion experiences. How did the learners think and feel about those with whom they were
supposed to be communicating, and how did they reflect on the experience itself? In notable contrast
to Burbules’ (1993) description of an experience of dialogue, the participants’ descriptions of the online
course discussion experience often contrasted their experience with “real” discussions, dialogue, and
relationships:

[F]or me personally when I'm about to post something in my discussion group, it is an
assignment, so I often go into Microsoft Word and I'm like basically in and out, and then play
with the concept and I edit it a couple of different ways or times, and then I copy and paste that
into the system. So it's not like it's just an easy dialogue flow, where you're exchanging
information with somebody. (Mary)

[H]alf the time I don't remember the names of these people that are in my class. I don't know
what their names are. I have no idea what their life looks like. Honestly, I don't really care. And if
I think about that, it makes me a little bit sad, because that's not really who I am. I'd rather have a
real relationship with someone. So, that's kind of a weird phenomenon. I remember there were a
couple of-- what were their names? Lindsays. They were a couple of Lindsays bouncing around
this course. And so I remember Lindsay because I think, "Oh, there're two Lindsays." I don't
know which one is which. I have no idea which one lives where, which one has children, which
one doesn't have children. . . .There's nothing to sink your teeth into. It just feels very-- it's kind
amorphous. It's fay. It's kind of light and fluffy. (Adele)

When asked directly to compare their online discussion experiences to face-to-face discussions,
for the most part, they felt the experience did not really compare.

I personally would not associate the discussion board with a face-to-face communication. There's
way too much that's left out. (Thomas)

[W]hat would come out of my mouth in a class wouldn't be the same as what I would post on a
discussion board. (Abby)

You don't have the personal interaction and that's the piece that's missing, and that you forfeit that
because you're studying on your own time. (Susan)

It is important to note that from the participants’ perspectives, “real” discussions were not restricted to
face-to-face synchronous communication. For example, Adele and Thomas both contrasted their online
course discussion experiences with more authentic engagement based on real relationships in Facebook.

[But] when I comment on somebody's thing [in Facebook], it's because I'm thinking of Shannon,
or I'm thinking of Steven, or I'm thinking of Robyn. And some of these people, I agree with them
on stuff, and some people, I don't agree with them on stuff, and some of us share these pieces of
our lives and don't share these-- whatever. But they're people [on Facebook] that I know who they
are, and these people in the class, I don't have any idea who they are. None. Really none. (Adele)
My audience on Facebook . . . They are very familiar with me. In a college setting, that's not necessarily the case. If I have any discussion with you on discussion board, you don't know me from Adam. Maybe you've seen my name on a couple posts. You don't know what I'm like. You don't know what I think is funny. You don't know what I think. You don't know when I'm serious. The people that I deal on Facebook do know, so, yeah, there's a lot of difference. I could say something on Facebook and it could just be words and my friends get it. My friends know exactly what I'm talking about, whether it's an inference, you know what I mean, so, yeah, there's a lot of difference. (Thomas)

In addition to comparing and contrasting their experiences to other experiences (or not, as was the case with Carmen), participants also evaluated the quality of their class discussions.

**Low quality “deliverable”.** A common way in which the discussion experience was described involved “going through the motions” or similar terminology. For example, “this feels like tick ing the box to me” (Adele) or “I think a lot of times the discussion experiences are just going through the motions” (Abby) or “I find that what we call discussion is framed and contrived” (John). Carmen, the most positive among the participants about her course discussions overall, contrasted her earlier course experiences to those of Course B, including the discussion forums in courses at other institutions: “The discussion boards [in courses prior to Course B] were always sort of going through the motions” (Carmen). The differences between Course B and the others will be further explored in the discussion of the instructor’s role below. Mary described it in terms of busy work: “We have to do online discussions where we're specifically required to respond to a certain number of people. And that responding to a certain number of people or responding to someone else's blog seems to me a little bit like busywork” (Mary). There was some recognition among at least one instructor of this learner experience: “And then probably 20% that see it as busy work and kind of checking the box, and it's just something that I need to do, so I do it” (Jessie, instructor interview). For some, the discussion posting was a deliverable: “It's very consistent from a discussion board like this, where this to me looks like my deliverable for this week. So when I think it's a deliverable, I write it properly or what I think of as properly” (Adele).

There was also the recognition among participants that people had quite habitual, predictable ways that they tended to respond to posts.
It's all this kind of gratuitous, oh that's a great point, and every once in a while you'd get a question. As you can see, I really didn't care that people [chuckles] commented on my thing. I think *a lot of times the discussion experiences are just going through the motions*. So I would say if that's the way dialogue is being defined for that purpose, then a lot of times it's not a dialogue [laughter]. But sometimes it is when something's interesting to people and people really want to give their opinion, but *most of the time I feel like people are giving their opinion because it's what's required for the course*. (Adele)

I think people have a standard response that they write to postings and the words are different but the general sentiment of the posting is the same, like, "Oh, great post. I've had this same experience in my blah blah blah." And, "Oh, I do that all the time. Thanks for sharing." It's just like this standard change a few words in it post. It does signify, "Yes, I read your post and yes, I can relate that to an experience that I've had", *but there's nothing meaningful*. (Abby)

John believed the discussions were so common in the courses because the instructors felt compelled by protocol to include them.

I don't feel that they really have any expectation out of that. I just think that it's something that came in the prescription, *that online courses have to have a discussion forum*, and I don't think anybody actually thought about this. I don't think there's any malice or intent or-- but I just don't think anyone gives this enough thought. (John)

When these sentiments are considered collectively in the context of Burbules’ (1993) description that “what underlies and shapes the patterns of interaction in a dialogue are the attitudes, emotions, and expectations that participants have regarding each other and the value of the dialogue itself,” it would seem that at least some of the participants’ attitudes, emotions, and expectations were of an experience that was relatively rote and affectively dull. This includes the production of a static artifact to be graded rather than an authentic engagement in a communicative process. Additionally, it is useful to re-frame Dewey's (1938) questions about learner experience in the context of this theme:

How many students, for example, were rendered callous to ideas, and how many lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which [participation in discussion forums] was experienced by them? (Dewey, 1938, p. 26, modifications made)

How many acquired special skills by means of automatic [participation in discussion forums] so that their power of judgment and capacity to act intelligently in new situations was limited? (Dewey, 1938, pp. 26-27, modifications made)

How many came to associate [participation in discussion forums] with ennui and boredom? (Dewey, 1938, p. 27, modifications made)
Importantly, the above discussion should not be taken to suggest that learners *always* or *only* experienced their discussions as a deliverable with little to no educational value. As will be explored further in the final theme (*WHAT* learners found beneficial about their discussions), this was not the totality of the learners’ experiences with their discussions. Individual participants did describe cases in which they were engaged and had stimulating experiences within the online discussion activity. That said, I have chosen to focus first on the theme of discussions as a low quality deliverable for the following reasons. First, given that much of the literature assumes learners’ cognitive and affective experiences based on what they post (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007), it was important to tell the story from their perspectives. Second, that learners might experience their discussions largely as a low quality deliverable is not necessarily inherently problematic. If the outcomes were being met and online course discussion facilitators, instructors, and researchers felt that this activity was achieving its desired educational ends, this type of study might not be as necessary. However, as demonstrated in the Literature Review, in general the content analysis (*what learners say*) and LMS network analytics studies (*what learners do*) tend to report disappointing findings. In less scholarly terms, one of the instructors reported that he found “the discussions and blogs in [his] course to be mindnumbingly boring and unhelpful. I am not sure what to do to fix them” (instructor email). These participant perspectives can help provide some learner experiential depth to this other empirical work. Lastly, as I emphasized in the “researcher identity” section of the Methods chapter, this research question was not value neutral and stemmed in large part from my interest in improving online education. Therefore, the next section of this chapter is dedicated to exploring themes related to potential explanations for *WHY* asynchronous discussions as an activity overall are not living up to the expectations of instructors, students, researchers, and learning designers alike.

**WHY Are They Having These Experiences of Discussions?**

**Participation practices heavily shaped by assignment specifics.** In the second interview, I did a stimulated recall with each participant, and in doing so observed firsthand the ways in which learners
approached this activity. In this recall, I asked them to walk me through a typical week in the course so that I could understand how the discussion activity fit within the broader course context. I arbitrarily chose lesson 6 of Course A for them to work through, and in addition to the lesson content (comprised of text, graphics, and a video) and the external reading (three chapters from their textbook), the only assignment for this week was discussion forum participation. In this recall, all participants described that the first thing they did at the beginning of the week was to check the roadmap for that lesson and determine what was due during that time period. Some had already printed this or exported it to a web calendar. Based on what was due, some then very linearly did the external reading, read/watched the lesson content, and then worked on their assignments for that week. One followed this order and very intentionally did not read any of the discussion prompts until after she had finished the course content so as not to bias how she was taking in the information. Some moved directly to the assignments, potentially skimming what they needed in the lesson reading to complete the work. This was not a study focused on learners’ reading habits, but I will mention that half of the participants read and watched everything. Among those in the other half, one accessed very little of the provided content, one did the external reading but not the lesson content, and two skimmed the lesson content but did very little with the external reading.

The participants then described how they would approach their discussion forum participation. The fact that in this course they had to respond to a particular question and also respond to two other posts that did not already have two other responses heavily shaped their participation practices. In all of the discussions, they described that they were required to post an initial response to the question prompt. All students had a fairly intentional way of authoring their initial post, and there were essentially two distinct approaches with how they authored that first post. Each approach potentially suggested some of the learners’ implicit views about the discussion’s purpose. The majority approach was to draft the post without looking at any others, which suggests that for some this was an opportunity for the articulation of independent thoughts. John described it as such: “It's a vehicle that creates an opportunity for that to take
place, and if I took the time to present my weekly discussion comment, I learn from that.” The second approach, described by three of the participants, was to rely heavily on the posts of others in order to determine how to craft their own. Interestingly, while on the surface the second approach might seem a more passive approach, it is actually more akin to the experience of a face-to-face classroom discussion, wherein before chiming in a participant hears what others say and then builds on it. It also aligns with Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson’s (1997) collaborative knowledge construction framework.

While, as discussed above, the participants were all aware of their classmates offering stock responses that did not really add to the discussion, they also did the same thing themselves at times because of the participation requirement.

But sometimes you can't add any -- I mean I do it all the time. I'm not going to lie, but sometimes I don't have anything meaningful to add. It's like when you're forced to have conversation and you don't really have input into it. Like, yeah I might have thoughts on the subject but they might be thoughts on a subject in a different way not in -- it's like it's so forced, like you have to respond to this specific question that you respond because you are required to but if you were to just freely speak about things that might not be what you would choose to speak about. (Abby)

Throughout many of the courses in the program, a common participation requirement was that students respond to two other posts for which there were not already two responses. For many students, what this meant was that when they went into the discussion forum to read and respond to their classmates, they did this very intentionally and looked to the right side of the interface in order to see how many responses a post already had. This would determine which posts they read. Mary and Russ both similarly described this common practice:

I know that I also have a responsibility to respond to two of my fellow teammates. What I do is I come over here to the replies, and would typically look to see who had not been replied to. If this person had four replies, I'd skip right over that and I'd probably go the ones that have one and/or zero, and I then I would try to reply to that. (Mary)

In this case, you look to see how many posts there are. In this case, [student name] had two people respond to her already. It's clear that [instructor name] says if there were more than one--if two posts had been made, you should try to find somebody who hasn't had any post or are less than two. So in this case, [student name] doesn't have two responses so I'd open up hers, with the thought is, what her thoughts are, click on reply. (Russ)
Hewitt’s (2005) study found that students’ default discussion participation pattern was to read and respond to unread messages first. In this study, I found the tendency toward different default participation behaviors, which was to use the analytics on the interface to determine which posts met the requirement for responding (i.e., did not already have two posts) and then read and respond to those. Hewitt describes his scenario as “rich-get-richer” (p. 578), whereas here the “poor” (those without two posts) got the attention. Similarly, here, learners experienced themselves as forced to respond and implicitly encouraged to prioritize reading those posts with the least number of responses regardless of content, interest, and perceived educational value. Notably, some did still follow Hewitt’s described pattern in terms of how they responded: “for me, typically, it was the first two people that posted” (Carmen). While different in specific behaviors, the practices in both Hewitt’s (2005) and the study discussed here were irrespective of content and shaped by the course requirements rather than interest or a conversational flow.

I had some people that would give one sentence. *I think because they just had to* [chuckles]. (Carmen)

I can guarantee you that if I click on these puppies, that *I made sure that I got done what I needed to get done to get my grade*, which was to comment on two other people’s posts. (Adele)
But like I said, if for example, somebody satisfies their criteria in this course and that means they've made their post and they've commented on two other colleagues, you won't expect to hear from them because they've moved on and if you comment and ask them questions or whatever, you can't expect them to actually come back because they don't have to. (John)

I just feel like when we *have to post things in the lesson* you have to put on a fake face. I feel like there would be a lot more real dialogue in an open discussion board. (Abby)

For John, this was inherently problematic in that

The way that they design this, they say if two people have already responded, move on to somebody else. And what I say is, if everybody want to respond to one post, then let them. And if nobody wants to respond to somebody's post, so be it. You can't enforce this type of policy to say that you have to read what somebody else says. (John)

Notably, not all learners participated this way. For instance, Carmen and Abby described in detail checking the posts every day and often having the LMS open to see if anyone had responded to them after initially posting.

And then I will minimize [LMS name], and maybe check it three hours later to see if anybody else has posted discussions. And then I’ll go in for 10 or 15 minutes and respond to discussions. And then I’ll close it out. And then maybe the next day when I go in, actually that's not true, I wouldn't wait until the next day. I'd probably would when I got home from work go on my iPad, and go into [LMS name], and look to see if anybody's responded to my discussion, or if anybody's posted anything new. I check [LMS name] probably three to four times a day. (Abby)

These behaviors arguably have some overlap with studies pertaining to social media habits and “social contact” needs (Chen, 2011). While Abby and Carmen did give more attention to the boards overall, it was still the case that every participant mentioned multiple times the required nature of the participation and discussed how it shaped their practices.

**Instructor participation experienced as inconsistent.** The area in which participants were most outspoken and consistent was the importance of the instructor’s active participation with their discussion experiences. This is certainly an area widely studied in the literature and typically described in terms of *teaching presence* (e.g., Garrison, 2007). The participants’ experiences confirmed its importance. As an example, both Susan and Thomas contacted me through email over a month after the interviews were over to share additional feedback about how important the instructor’s role was to their experience.
Thomas also spoke at length on this during the interviews. His sentiments encapsulated how the majority of participants discussed it.

The instructor involvement is huge. That is by far, in my opinion, the number one determining factor of how well the discussion boards go, the instructor involvement. . . . If you have an instructor that's involved and they're telling you how much they appreciate your discussion and they talk a little bit about it, more people are going to be involved. When you have an instructor that doesn't pay any attention to the discussion board, simply gives you your ten points or whatever it is for discussing that week, well, then that tells you right from jump street he could care less whether I post five paragraphs or two sentences. That's number one in my opinion for a successful discussion board. (Thomas)

The example participants consistently offered as a good model for instructor involvement was that of instructor Bethany’s discussion forum participation in Course B. At the time of the interviews, seven of the eight students had completed or were actively taking Course B. It was their enthusiasm about the instructor’s methods in Course B that led me to do a more detailed analysis of the course and to ask questions in later interviews in which I explicitly had learners compare and contrast courses in order to further tease out differences. One notable difference with Course B when compared to Course A (and based on student input to other courses in the program) was that rather than being provided the discussion prompts, each week one or two students were responsible for coming up with the prompt and facilitating the discussion itself. This was mentioned repeatedly as a more positive experience. In describing why Course B was typically a better experience for them than Course A (and some of the other courses they had taken), a key reason given was the perception of lack of instructor involvement in the majority of their other courses and how that negatively impacted the quality of their discussion experience. As I discussed in the Methods chapter, it was because of these initially unprompted participant comparisons of these two courses that I determined it would be fruitful to look at them in greater depth. When describing why they had such better experiences in Course B than Course A, Carmen and Susan offered the following,

I would say we have the most in depth dialogue [in Course B]. We have the best discussion boards. We get a long running conversation going about topics. We have engaged faculty, so that helps us. (Carmen)
I think I put more effort into it when the instructor was more visible. Because as long as I satisfied it in [Course A instructor’s] world, I don't think it would have made a difference. So I think it was just the mere fact that I answered the question. If [Course B instructor] was more visible then I should really be thoughtful how I'm managing this. . . .Because she cared. If she was taking the time to read it, she really cared.

Another important finding here is that instructor facilitation does not have to take place in the discussion forum itself in order to be impactful. In general, the instructor for Course B did not type in the discussions themselves but instead made comments to individuals in grading their discussions and commented more broadly about the discussions in course announcements and emails to the entire class. Where the instructor involved herself with the discussions—the discussion itself, email, grades, announcements—did not seem important when compared to the fact that she clearly involved herself. As an example, Susan misremembered that Bethany, the instructor for Course B, was highly active in the forums themselves. When she went to show me examples of Bethany’s participation during the stimulated recall interview, however, she realized that she was mistaken and in actuality Bethany had not typed at all in the forums but instead in her individual graded feedback. Therefore, it should not be assumed from this finding about the centrality of instructor participation that it is a requirement that it take place in the forum itself. This is especially important given that some instructors want to protect that space for student engagement (pilot instructor interview).

The ways in which participants described their experiences in Course B seemed the exception that demonstrated the larger rule of a general lack of discussion forum involvement by most of their instructors.

Yeah, I feel like I'm writing for my classmates more than the instructor. I honestly, I don't even know if some of the instructors read these. (Abby)

Well I can't see any participation of the instructor here. (Adele)

And I had one instructor that was absolutely absentee . . . But in this forum, you really need more . . . (Russ)

I guess my take on it is if they don't respond to the post, then the post-- I mean, there are certainly learning opportunities, but they are just shy of busy work. (Mary)
Many of the participants wanted more engagement with their instructors, and when asked what the one thing they would want instructors to know about their course discussion experiences, the responses again confirmed the need for more instructor involvement.

I think that the most important thing should be that during discussion has to in some capacity include the professor. (John)

Involvement; they have to be involved in this process.” (Brent)

This sense of a lack of involvement was actually confirmed by some of the faculty who articulated perceptions similar to the following:

I do try to read some of the posts, but it’s a little overwhelming, because with 20 students in the class and everyone required to post, and not all the posts are that interesting. (instructor interview)

While I would argue that the importance of instructor involvement was one of the strongest points made by the participants as a group, it did not fully explain why they seemed to fairly consistently have “checking the box” and “going through the motions” type experiences in their discussions. For instance, even those who acknowledged that the facilitation style of Bethany in Course B was much preferable and more motivating than the facilitation style of the instructors in Course A and some of their other courses, they still ranked discussions as a relatively low impact learning experience when compared with other course projects. Other potential explanatory factors are discussed further below.

**Asynchronous, recorded, written communication shapes experiences.** One of the explanations participants gave for why their experiences were as they were (e.g., not “real discussions”) was due to the nature of communicating in an asynchronous, recorded, written environment.

**Asynchronous communication.** In spite of the fact that the notion of time has certainly been altered by technology affordances, and for some the impact of time has decreased, time delays in communication do mean people are necessarily experiencing the online discussion differently from each other. Adams and van Manen (2006) explained that when considering asynchronous written communication compared to synchronous conversation, “the space of [online, asynchronous] writing has a different temporal-spatial quality” (p. 13). While none of the students used the term “temporal-spatial,”
it is clear that when they talked about how time impacted their experiences that this was a strong mediating factor both positively and negatively. The asynchronicity of the discussion definitely shaped how the students experienced it.

There's the initial wave, and then there's maybe the middle of the week wave, and then the end of the week wave. And I usually catch the initial wave and the middle of the week wave. I'm probably done by the end of the week, so I don't catch that last wave. (Abby)

I would read them on whatever day I was getting this done, and hope to God that other people--and they usually were, people were ahead of me always. So a couple of people had already posted, and I would read whatever they had posted. (Adele)

We're not always replying at the same time, not everybody's replying to everybody. So it's not like a real discussion. (Mary)

It's a bummer though that I feel like sometimes I miss the participation by the way it's structured. When you think about the class questions that come out, you've got people that are there in the first two days, and I may not be there the first two days. (Susan)

In addition to talking specifically about how the asynchronous nature constrained the discussion experience, it seems important to note that the flexibility that comes with an asynchronous online course is one of the primary benefits students identified for participating in this type of educational experience. One participant worked third shift; another was in a Western European country; and another spent nearly half the year in a North African country and, as he described it, “the idea is that time becomes a non-issue, because you have to meet people in the morning on the other side of the world” (John). Multiple participants, especially regarding the input of diverse perspectives in the discussions, highlighted the benefits of diversity. Without the affordances of asynchronous communication, many of these individuals would not have been able to participate. Carmen mentioned multiple times the opportunities of interacting with a student from China, and both John and Adele spoke about interacting with students participating from India. The point in identifying some of the ways in which the asychronicity might contribute to some of the challenges students have experientially should not be taken to suggest that the solution is to simply require synchronous, video-based discussions instead.
As an example, there were certainly exceptions where the asychronicity was described in positive terms and did seem to echo early theoretical promises for the discussion activity (Henri, 1992). For example, for Carmen and Abby, “time” was given as a reason they liked the discussions.

I really like the discussion boards, because it gives you that time to think. And I think it gives a better dialogue than if you're just talking to somebody in person, and you have just that little bit of time that you're together. I think the discussion boards are more thought out, so it gives you a better dialogue. People have better ideas that they're putting forward. (Carmen)

But I do like that you can post in the discussion forum and then someone else posts at their convenience, so I do like that. (Abby)

**Recorded communication.** Multiple participants mentioned the impact of editing themselves before posting as one of the factors that limited their sense of engagement. In part this is explained by what they experienced as a “politically correct” or “polite” culture. As researchers Adams and van Manen, 2006) described writing in cyberspace, “We tend to think that written discourse is irrevocable. And, of course, this is true once a text has been posted on the board, sent by email, put into printed out in hard copy.” (p. 7). Most of the participants expressed a consistent theme related to the fact that they felt that the culture of communicating in written form tended to be more polite and less spontaneous than their face-to-face discussions and, importantly, that this limited the quality of the discussion.

I think the editing that people do. I think that the way people want to be perceived or people want to be polite. I think that that's what keeps them from really being interesting and thought provoking. (Abby)

It seems like most people are afraid to say anything for fear they're going to offend somebody. That kind of irritates me, it makes me angry. Don't be afraid to offend somebody. Speak what you're trying to say. You'll read something, and you can see that they're beating all around the bush, and they're going all they way out to Los Angeles and back, just so they [laughter] don't offend somebody, and it makes the statement so vague and so powdered that you can't get them to communicate. (Thomas)

But what discussion really means is something that you have to get a little bit deeper into this and say, "What is this process we call discussion really about?" It isn't just like groupthink. It isn't just like, "Oh, yeah that's great. That's a great thought. I liked what you said." We can flatter each other all day, and I'm not the one who wants to just be stuck on disagreeing. But I think that what I would say is through my experience the real dilemma in this is this groupthink process. (John)

My experience with online discussions in sort of the academia arena is that people are very polite, but because they're so polite they don't necessarily say no, I think you're off base. And someone
telling me I think you're off-base and this is why I think you're off-base could be a really big learning opportunity for me; *I just don't get that kind of feedback.* (Mary)

**Written communication.** Written communication requires more agency than speaking and listening. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) described this communication as a “lean medium” in that nonverbal communications, voice inflections, and other dimensions of face-to-face communication do not, and often cannot, happen in a text-based communicative environment. For participants, communicating in this way lacks important social cues and also requires more effort. While this has been widely discussed in the research concerning online text-based communication, it seems important that even though this is now such a common way to communicate, it still negatively impacts participants’ experiences. As three of the participants explained,

It's just the one bad thing about it is that you aren't able to read non-verbal cues. You aren't able to see people while they're doing it. And sometimes you get a lot out of that. So, sometimes you're using your own thoughts and ideas when you're reading people's things, so you might be reading something into it that might not be there. That is the one disadvantage I don't like about it, because you can't see. How they're saying it might totally convey a different meaning than what they're putting out there. (Carmen)

As you are fully aware, you and I looking at each other on a screen, I can see your reaction to A, my tone, my gestures, all that stuff that we take for granted in communication. When that's not here that changes drastically. So if I type something, like I'm sure you've read an email before that comes off sounding one way, and it's probably not meant that way at all, and the same thing happens in a discussion board. Somebody can say something, and you'll sit there and you'll read it three different ways going like, "I'm not sure what they meant by that." I have found in the discussion boards that is a huge factor especially when you're trying to get feelings across, something that's very important to you, or somebody touched a nerve with you, or there's so many factors that you lose in that type discussion that cannot be replaced with the face-to-face. (Thomas)

I think it's the changing brain, and having to go from the thinking and talking to the putting fingers to keypads. It's very irritating. I mean, I can only talk so fast. More things happen in my brain, and I can only talk so fast. This is enough slow down, and to have to put fingers to keys is just an additional slow down. It makes me crazy. (Adele)

When considering these factors, it might be suggested that as long as we are going to have asynchronous, recorded written discussions, many of these concerns will be in play. They seem to be dimensions inherent to the nature of this type of communication. That said, the next sub-theme of user interface is one that is arguably more changeable.
LMS user interface limits seamless communication. While much of the above is inherent to this type of communication, especially in contemporary society where people are very aware of the vulnerability of what they write in a recorded space, another area shaping participants’ experiences was the design of the user interface itself. This is something that can be changed, albeit not easily. Many described the user experience as unnecessarily clunky and not at all seamless and, importantly to this study, as something that negatively impacted their discussion experience.

On a discussion board, when people post on a discussion board in your class, you have to click through like a million times to get to that discussion board, and then you have to click through on that class, then you have to click on what's new, then you have to wait for something else to load, then you have to click a little plus sign and drop it down, then you have to click the specific forum. It's just a lot of clicks. Whereas on a Facebook news-feed it just comes up, or basically just comes up in your news-feed and it's maybe one click to see what people have said about something. (Abby)

So the one thing you have to be aware of is to find your way back; find your way back to the original question and make sure you're commenting on what you want to comment on rather than-things get to be red herrings. Not red herrings exactly, but you may end of commenting on something and it'll get lost. It'll just be mired.” (Adele)

I think it really does affect it. I want to say it doesn't, but it does. The discussion forum is black and white to-- it's a communication apparatus. It's very non-fuzzy. There's nothing warm about it. You press this button you go to here, you type in whatever, press this button, you're done. There is no room for your picture, there is no room for colors to make it warm and fuzzy and appealing. It's a wall that you're sticking something to for everybody to see, and then people all go to that wall and see it, and just stick other things on top of it until you got-- it's almost like post-it notes. The most generic post-it note yellow, ugly one you can find, and then you got a string of them that are all stuck together. That's what it's sort of like. I'm a visual person. (Russ)

I think that online course discussions are more - and I really never did a lot of this but I think it's more like the old school chat rooms, except it's not live. Like the old I don't know Yahoo or AOL chats although those were more of real time I think and the people were there at the same time but I do feel like the format of them, the way they look and stuff, it's old. It's like that old school chat. . . . I think it's more similar to Facebook because the person is not actually online at the same time as you necessarily but the way it looks and feels is more similar to the old school, or Yahoo, or AOL chat rooms. (Abby)

Well, I have to go and click in [the LMS], click down through the threaded discussions, do all that kind of stuff. It's very tedious and it's a pain. That is a pain compared to in a classroom where they have the conversations. (instructor interview)

One might rightly inquire as to whether or not these experiences were unique to the specific LMS used in this program. There is some validity to that, in that the university at which this study was
conducted was in the process of transitioning to a more contemporary LMS. At the same time, one bit of researcher luck was that Susan, Mary, and Carmen all had previous online course discussion experiences at other universities that took place within different LMSs. When speaking about their discussion experiences, they tended to group them together, regardless of LMS. Adams and van Manen (2006) also discussed this in their phenomenological exploration of experiences writing in an online space. In their estimation, the experience of writing online in an asynchronous threaded environment transcends the specifics of the LMS (e.g., Moodle, Blackboard, or something else; Adams & van Manen, 2006, p. 1). Additionally, Morris and Stommel (2013) described the discussion forum as “a ubiquitous component of every learning management system and online learning platform from Blackboard to Moodle to Coursera” and an LMS component marked by “one relatively standardized interface” (para. 1). Therefore, it is arguable that a significant part of the experience would persist across discussion forums in different LMSs. The purpose of this study was not to compare the experience across interfaces, but the findings, combined with those of Adams and van Manen (2006) and Morris and Stommel (2013), suggest that some of these experiences might be innate to the nature of threaded asynchronous online discussions housed within an industry standard LMS.

The above is not an exhaustive list of all the potential explanations for why students had the experiences they did within the discussions. As highlighted in the previous chapter, in addition to being considered as a collective, the participants were unique individuals who brought their own sets of expectations, past experiences, and preferred learning modalities to these online course discussions. What I tried to do in the above was highlight what seemed to be the most compelling themes that resonated across individual participant cases, and I intentionally focused on the things that seemed to most get in the way of seamless, high quality discussions from the learners’ perspectives. This again was because of the prevailing trend in the empirical literature suggesting that overall discussions are not living up to their expectations or potential. That said, in spite of much of the above having a predominantly negative cadence, it is important to also understand that discussions were still important to the students, and in the
final section of this chapter, I highlight what they tended to describe as the discussions’ purpose, as they understood it both actual from their experiences and its potential if discussions were done correctly.

**WHAT do they Value about their Online Course Discussions?**

Most participants would keep discussions as a course activity. I end with this theme because in spite of what was discussed above and the fact that nearly all of the students felt at least sometimes that they were “going through the motions” with their class discussions, when asked directly whether or not they would keep them in the program, all except for one said that they would. When asked if she would keep the discussions, Carmen, who, as described elsewhere, was the most enthusiastic about her discussion forum experiences, quickly responded “Absolutely.” When asked to elaborate, she explained that,

> Because I feel, if they're done correctly and maintained by the faculty, interjecting when they see it stagnating. *If it's done correctly, I think they can be a big learning tool,* because we're learning so much about, not just the topics, but about each other, about how the different businesses work, how these ideas translate to other people's thinking, other cultures. So, I definitely think they're of value if they're done the right way. (Carmen)

John, who tended to take a critical stance toward the discussions, did remark that, “as I see it, the discussion forum has the potential of being the most important component of the course and I would just say that it's not reaching its full potential” (John).

I want to focus on one notable exception. Adele was the only participant of the eight who would not include discussions if she were designing courses in the program. This is important to note because she was still craving the engagement with her classmates that ideally could or should have taken place in the online discussion but from her experience was not. She wanted that engagement and talked about the idealized world that professors have, that she herself also had, in which students have critical discussions. She just did not think it was happening in the discussions as it is idealized. When I asked her to talk more about why she would not include discussions in terms of the “intellectual engagement” she had discussed earlier, she explained, “Oh, no. It's not that I don't want it. I absolutely want it. It's just that A, I'm not finding it, and B, I don't know how to find it” (Adele). She then went on to somewhat facetiously, though
also importantly, suggest that instructors need to do more match-making in the background: “Can you profile the people for me, and go, ‘All of these people are working their asses off and all making A’s, and I think you'll have a good time talking to these people’?” (Adele).

Many of the participants would not change much about the format of the discussions, including their value in the final grade, their typical format with a provided question, or the requirement that each student respond to two comments that did not already have two responses. Whether to say this was because of a lack of awareness of how to redesign the discussions to be more effective or because students simply felt the discussions were best designed at present was outside the domain of this study. Nevertheless, it was an interesting finding, given the sense of drudgery with which the learners described their discussion experiences. John and Mary, however, did have suggestions for the way they would design the weekly discussions so that the emphasis was not on interaction with one’s classmates but with the course instructor.

I'm saying that the thread of discussion, rather than being a group conversation with your colleagues, that the thread of discussion is actually led by the professor, where the professor is the one who asks the question, and everyone is answering the professor with their response. (John)

Where the professor asks us a question and we all respond based on our thoughts and our learning. I think that itself is important. (Mary)

This perspective again speaks to the importance of the instructor to the success of online asynchronous discussions and also reaffirms research on the importance of instructor-student interactions (e.g., Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007; Hew, 2015).

**Learners value group process, social interaction, and idea articulation.** Some learners found the most value in small group discussions in which they were working together toward a concrete deliverable, such as a paper or presentation. Mary first described the typical discussion experience:

Here's a topic and talk about it. . . Here's my thoughts. Comment on it. Make two comments. (Mary)

She then contrasted it with a discussion experience in a course in which a group worked through the discussion to collectively develop a final deliverable rather than only discussing a topic.
It was more like a discussion on how we're going to-- what are we going to add into the marketing plan. Here's my ideas. I like that. Let's take this, this, and this, and do this. It was more of an actual real discussion. (Mary)

Others found the most value in the thought articulation functions.

I think discussion is necessary, I think it's validating too. I think that to put into words, things that you're thinking, re-enforces the concepts that you're learning, and it kind of makes you feel like, "I get it," that you can have a coherent thought on whatever the topic is. So in that way I think it's validating. (Abby)

I think that discussion is the only opportunity you'll ever get to actually say something. (John)

[I]t is the only activity really that you share anything with the other classmates. (Thomas)

For others, it was the interactions with classmates that they found most impactful within the discussions.

I think in general the class discussions allow participants in the class to get to know everybody else in the class. . . In all honesty I also like the perspective that maybe I didn't see something, but maybe somebody did, and it draws it to my attention. It's kind of like that lightbulb moment, like, "Wow, I didn't think of it that way." (Russ)

I like the discussion boards, because I like that portion of the group learning. I like getting on there, hearing what people have to say, getting feedback from people. (Carmen)

I end with this theme because this study was ultimately conducted within a broad framework of pragmatic research. And, given this pragmatic vein of inquiry, if I ended with only the other themes, it might be inadvertently suggested by this research that discussion forums as a learning activity are something that should be discontinued as a practice. I do not think that is the case, however. I do think that they are not living up to their potential and that the need for meaningful engagement among classmates and with instructors, dialogue potentially, is not taking place to the level that the educational community—instructors, learning designers, researchers, and students alike—want.

**Summary of Themes**

As Saldaña (2013) suggested, sometimes articulating the findings as a narrative or even poetic format can be a useful way to present the data (pp. 94, 107, 126). Before closing this chapter, therefore, I offer my own personal interpretative summary synthesizing the themes developed out of my 25-plus hours of conversation with the eight participants. If asked to describe how the typical learner tends to
experience their required asynchronous online discussion, I would suggest that the following might encapsulate it:

“I’m a hardworking student, highly motivated at my job, and pursuing this degree for career improvement and advancement. I participate in the discussions largely because I am required to, I approach them very pragmatically, and I typically feel they are low quality, though it is nice when people respond my posts. I am highly aware of whether or not my instructor participates in the discussions and I feel many instructors aren’t even reading the posts, which is discouraging to me because I definitely work harder when they are involved. It’s really hard to have a natural conversation because they are so spread out over the week and the time delay means I can only easily read and respond to some of the posts depending on when I log in. The discussions are a logistical pain to participate in, I have to click a lot, it’s clunky to get around, I can’t easily tell who I’m talking to, and I always have to be polite with what I write. But, I still believe class discussions are important and necessary for learning, so I wouldn’t suggest getting rid of them; however, except for a few broad ideas, I can’t really tell you how to make them better.”
(researcher, interpretative synthesis)

To summarize, learners tended to experience their discussions as a lower quality deliverable where participation was required. Their patterns were shaped by the specific course requirements, the nature of communicating in an asynchronous, recorded, written format, and how the user interface itself impeded the flow of seamless conversation. Learners were highly aware of the participation of their instructors and felt that more often than not, their instructors were absent from the discussion. All that said, the majority of participants would not suggest removing the threaded discussion as an activity and felt that some of its benefits were demonstrating a knowledge of the curriculum and connecting with others in the class.

Ultimately, the frameworks for learner experience of both Dewey (1938) and Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011) are driven by a pragmatic desire to improve teaching and learning. Dewey described this in terms of the “educator’s responsibility,” and Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap discussed the instructional design implications of a focus on learners’ experience. Given that I—like Dewey, Parrish, Wilson, Dunlap and many others in this field—are ultimately driven by pragmatist motives to improve education, the themes I emphasized above were in part inspired by the idea that in better understanding learners’ experiences with online discussions, we might be able to improve them. Therefore, in the next chapter, in
addition to exploring the research and theoretical implications of this study, I will highlight some potential design and facilitation practices that might be suggested by the findings of this study.
Chapter 6

Discussion and Implications

Like many qualitative studies, this study was thick and rich with data and possible interpretations. In the previous two chapters, I have done my best to provide a portrait of the student and instructor participants, of their shared environing conditions in the program itself as well as in two specific courses that the majority of the participants had taken. I additionally identified themes that emerged and spanned individual participant experiences. In this chapter, I will explore some key theoretical implications, practical implications, and future research possibilities suggested by this study.

Theoretical Implications

Confirmatory of existing research. While the intention of this study was not to be a “replication” study, I will highlight a few of the key areas in which the participants’ experiences did align with and confirm the findings of other existing empirical work. As discussed in the literature review, there is some empirical evidence of disappointing results when it comes to content and network analysis of discussion forum participation behaviors (e.g., Ertmer et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2001; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Kanuka et al., 2007; Wise & Chiu, 2011). This trend was largely supported by the participants’ qualitative descriptions of their experiences, as the prevailing theme expressed among participants was one in which the discussion experience was not living up to its full potential, and this is wholly in line with existing empirical work.

Importantly, though, as more recent work in this area has cautioned us, the aggregate can often belie important specificity with individual cases (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007; Wise, Perera, Hsiao, Speer, & Marbouti, 2012). As Rourke and Kanuka (2007) found, students view the purpose of the discussion quite differently from each other. In the case of this study, Carmen was unique in that when compared to the others, she consistently expressed the most enthusiasm for her discussion forums as a positive learning activity. Similarly, John was the only participant who viewed the discussions as a site for intentional provocation.
Finally, though this study did not set out to validate the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, and that work has been done in many other empirical venues (Garrison, 2007), much of the participants’ descriptions aligned naturally with the CoI dimensions, especially social and teaching presence. For many, what was missing in the discussions was a sense of social presence. Social presence is described as the ability of individuals to “project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). The lack of social presence in the online discussion space was perhaps best expressed by Adele when she pointedly acknowledged that she did not know who any of the people were. All of the participants craved more meaningful connections, pictures, and other ways to have a sense that those they were interacting with in the discussion forums were “real” people.

The learners also affirmed the centrality of teaching presence in their consistent desire for more active, involved instructor facilitation (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). While there is now increasing discussion about the role of peer facilitation, especially in MOOCs and other large-scale course environments where active instructor facilitation can be quite difficult, the participants in this study echoed the findings of other work like that of Hew (2015) that “most students irrespective of student samples still preferred an instructor to peer facilitation when it comes to online discussions” (p. 19). Nearly all of the students in this study commented on the importance of their instructors reading their discussion posts and, even more substantially, of them being actively involved in the students’ learning process. Adele explained her frustration with the lack of a meaningful teaching presence in terms of the substance of the instructor communication: “he doesn't write back anything. He just writes, ‘Outstanding work,’ I'm like, ‘That tells me nothing.’” This study confirmed that not only do students want to know their instructors are engaged with them, they also want meaningful contributions from them, an important part of the teaching presence dimension of the CoI.

**Need for re-conceptualization of online discussions.** This study was intentionally not a comparative study between face-to-face class discussions and online class discussions. I take seriously
Abrami, Bernard, Bures, Borokhovski, and Tamim’s (2011) argument that the time has come to stop comparing everything done online to the residential classroom, as if it were the ideal model to emulate. However, even if classroom interaction were the ideal against which online discussions should be evaluated, the reality is that very little of what the participants described actually compared to the classroom model of discussion. Learners were much more likely to describe their discussion experiences in terms of email or social media communication. Additionally, they talked about the ability to have connections, engagement, and “real” discussion with people online whether in social media settings or asynchronous work settings but, for the most part, not in their online class discussions. Of all of the ways the students described their online discussion experiences, the face-to-face classroom discussion counterpart was the least comparable.

Alyssa Wise is a leading researcher in this area, and she and her team have done important work in using survey research, content analysis, and LMS network data to understand more accurately what is taking place for learners in their online course discussions, both at the aggregate level as well as the individual case level (Wise & Chiu, 2011; Wise, Hausknecht, & Zhao, 2014; Wise, Marbouti, Hsiao, & Hausknecht, 2012; Wise, Perera, Hsiao, Speer, & Marbouti, 2012; Wise, Saghafian, & Padmanabhan, 2012; Wise, Speer, Marbouti, & Hsiao, 2013). This research has pushed the field to broaden its study of online discussions to move beyond focusing only on the content of what learners post to look more holistically at learners’ behaviors. Toward this end, researchers have extended the typical analogy of posting in the online discussion as parallel to “speaking” in the face-to-face class to also include the “listening” component which they define as “how learners interact with the existing discussion; which posts they attend to, when, and how” (Wise et al., 2013, p. 323). In an effort to contextualize this important work within the learners’ experiences, I asked each participant how the analogy of “speaking and listening” aligned with their experiences of “posting and reading.” For the most part, they could see the comparison but tended to disagree with it experientially and then described how those activities in the online discussion were not actually like “speaking” or “listening” for them but rather like something else
that existed only in this unique space of required discussions within the asynchronous online course. This is not to suggest that Wise should do away with that analogy, as I think it has enabled a great deal of important work in broadening the notion of what we should be studying in the online discussion space. This is just to emphasize that when we conceptualize the online course discussion experience, the face-to-face classroom discussion is arguably least like it.

**Need for more learner experience research.** As developed in the theoretical framework chapter, learner experience as a lens through which to study instructional design is not the dominant framework right now (Parrish, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011). This is typically true of education, and there are a number of valid reasons for this—it is incredibly time consuming to do it well, it can be expensive, and to some degree it may not be as necessary if the learning outcomes and pedagogical goals are being achieved within the learning spaces. That said, in a completely different research paradigm, in the early 1900’s educational psychologist Thorndike showed that if you simply gave learners new answers without addressing their misconceptions, they continued to hold both ideas (Schunk, 2012, pp. 73-78). I would suggest the same phenomenon might be relevant here as well. If we do not have a more thorough understanding of how the learners are, to use Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) verbiage, “orienting” to their activities, can we really ensure that they are experiencing those activities as the pedagogy intends? E-Learning research tends to be teacher-centered (Sharpe and Bennefield, 2005), which is not necessarily a problem if a course or program is believed to be “working” and outcomes are aligning with goals. But in an area like online discussions that continues to be both prevalent and consistently disappointing, might not we need to expand our framework for how we use research to potentially solve the challenge? I would echo the call of Parrish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011) that both research and practice “help create richer and more robust forms of learning experience in the future,” (p. 21) and I would suggest that we do this in part by continuing to explore, in non-superficial ways, the complexities of experiences that learners are having in these learning environments and with these learning activities.

**Practical Implications**
In the following, I will highlight a few ways in which the design and facilitation of online course discussions might be improved as potentially suggested by the findings of this study. As a disclaimer, these are preliminary ideas and are only suggested, neither tested nor confirmed, by this study.

**Clearly define the purpose of the discussion activity.** Before implementing discussions in the course, it seems useful for instructors and course designers to work toward some clarity regarding the purpose of the discussions and to design them accordingly. As Rourke and Kanuka (2007) effectively highlighted, online discussions are implemented for a wide variety of purposes, from “collaborative meaning making, informal argumentation, group problem solving” to “emancipatory dialogue, dialogue journaling, or relational communication” (pp. 105-106). Toward this end, a potentially useful exercise for the instructors and course designers is to reflect on their intended outcome of the discussion. Is it to achieve an engaged dialogue in which learners have authentic experiences of interaction with each other? And/or is it for students to individually demonstrate cognition and their grasp of key concepts? And/or is it for rigorous debate and conflicting viewpoints? And/or is it a space for social presence wherein learners get to know each other and their instructors as “real people”? For example, by listening to these students, I was able to learn that the participants had very different expectations for appropriate communication in this setting. Some regarded it as more formal, similar to how they would write a paper, and others intentionally wrote in ways that were closer to how they would speak. Given that the nature of this type of discussion means the learners are impacted by how their fellow learners communicate, I might suggest modeling preferred styles of communication to see how that impacts their experiences.

Part of the simultaneous opportunity and challenge with online course discussions is that their pedagogical purposes are extremely diffuse, and even among the instructors who designed the courses there was a lack of clarity as to what they hoped the learners would demonstrate, produce, be able to do, and experience in participating in the activity. It is arguably overly simplistic to suggest that the course itself should contain a more detailed description of the intended outcomes for the discussion forum as an activity, especially given that many students will not read such a description. At the same time, it does
seem essential that within individual courses, instructors are clear on what they expect from the discussions as an activity and that the discussions are designed and facilitated accordingly. For example, when asked the purpose of the discussions, Abby explained “To get other people’s point of view on things, I guess is one purpose. Maybe to clarify things that you don't understand, or concepts that you don't have experience with” whereas for John they were to be “provocative.” These are arguably quite distinct purposes, and without explicit clarity on what learners are supposed to be doing, they might be participating at unproductive cross-purposes.

**Strategically integrate video to enhance social presence.** Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) described text-based online discussions as a “lean medium” in that nonverbal communications, voice inflections, and other dimensions of face-to-face communication do not, and often cannot, happen in a text-based communicative environment (p. 90). They also defined social presence in terms of learners’ abilities to project themselves as “real people” into the online environment (p. 89). Participants in this study certainly articulated the limiting nature of this lean medium in describing their online discussion experiences lacking social presence:

- They were a couple of [Shirleys] bouncing around this course. And so I remember [Shirley] because I think, "Oh, there're two [Shirleys]." I don't know which one is which. I have no idea which one lives where, which one has children, which one doesn't have children. (Adele)

- That is the one disadvantage I don't like about it, because you can't see. How they're saying it might totally convey a different meaning than what they're putting out there. (Carmen)

- That is a huge factor especially when you're trying to get feelings across, something that's very important to you, or somebody touched a nerve with you, or there's so many factors that you lose in that type discussion. (Thomas)

In a study looking specifically at how instructors’ use of video and requirement of students to use video (either VoiceThread or YouSeeU) enhanced students’ experiences of social presence in online courses, Borup, West, and Graham (2012) found that the use of video improved both their instructor’s and peers’ social presence.

Given the multiple participants who spoke about all that was lost regarding social presence in their discussions, combined with the increased availability of video-based tools that allow asynchronous
communication and the promising findings of studies like Borup et al.’s (2012), one design recommendation is to strategically integrate video-based discussions that would allow learners to more naturally establish social presence and experience each other authentically. This suggestion to integrate video is being made with a few cautions. First, even though Borup et al. (2012) found an increased sense of social presence over text-based communication alone, they also reported students’ reported sense that other students were not watching their videos. This is consistent with the findings here in that multiple participants reported not reading their classmates’ posts beyond what was required by the assignment. Borup et al. (2012) also found that some students continued to choose text over video as their means of response (p. 201). Additionally, Hew and Cheung (2013) found that in a study comparing audio-based to text-based discussions that over half of their participants preferred the text-based discussions. While audio and video are importantly different, some of the reasons for preferring text-based might apply when compared to video as well. For example, students in Hew and Cheung’s study reported appreciating the time to formulate and edit ideas before expressing them as well as the more visually structured nature of the text-based discussion. One option, therefore, is to integrate video sparingly and intentionally to help with social presence but not replace all of the text-based discussions.

**Actively facilitate course discussions.** If asynchronous discussions are an important part of the course, then they should be treated as such in terms of grading, structure, and time invested in their care and feeding (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). Instructors should expect the discussion to take time. This was supported by the instructor interviews with Jessie and Bethany, who both described reading all of the posts and the significant time investment involved in such an approach. Certainly, the last 20-plus years of research have shown that of all the elements in the online course, discussion forums are the least likely to “run themselves.” Most participants felt the discussions both could and should have been better than they were, and one of the persistent points of feedback related to instructor involvement. As Abby explained when describing the importance of having an instructor facilitate the discussions,

> Because I feel like they're more interested in whether or not we're learning, whether or not we have questions. It makes me feel more validated to write a post and have an instructor respond to
it than a classmate. Because ultimately I look at the instructor as being the expert, and to have them say, "Yeah what you're saying is really a great point," is more validating than having a classmate say it. It also shows me that they're interested in what we're doing. And it just makes me feel like I'm having a better learning experience.

Further, some learners, like John, felt that discussions had the potential to be the best part of the course. That the participants who were notably more positive in their evaluation of their experiences in Course B compared it to their other courses speaks to this factor as well. Bethany, as the original course author and designer, viewed discussions as central to learning, designed them intentionally to involve students with students generating their own posts, and committed the time to actively facilitating them. This was acknowledged by all of the students who had completed or were enrolled in Course B.

**Continue to bridge the research/practice gap.** This study confirmed Rourke and Kanuka’s (2007) findings in that students did orient to discussions differently and saw more effort as not worth it in terms of the grading, and while a small minority of students seemed to relish argumentation, most experienced it as confrontational and something to be avoided rather than encouraged. Additionally, for those with some grounding in the empirical research pertaining to asynchronous discussions and online learning, the reality of the need for instructor involvement is well documented, and this study validated what is already known about online discussions but is not always practiced. The instructors that I worked with to do this study were extremely motivated and cared about their students. They remarked repeatedly that they were excited about this project and were encouraging of it because they valued anything that would help them improve the program through improving the online discussions (instructor phone conversations). From my perspective, the fact that much of these findings is well known but infrequently practiced suggests that we need to continue to address the reality that the majority of online instructors are not conversant with the findings of e-learning literature. Therefore, in the following, I briefly address some potential ways that the research/practice gap might be at least somewhat ameliorated.

**Enhance the role of instructional design.** The process for designing and developing online courses varies greatly across and within universities (Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter, 2015). Some online courses are produced by a solitary faculty member with no foundation in pedagogy or e-learning. Some
are developed collaboratively between a learning designer (or learning design team) and faculty member. Aleckson and Ralston-Berg (2011) argued that this type of collaboration can produce higher quality learning materials and also allows each collaborator to draw on his or her expertise. It may not be the case that instructors across diverse disciplines will ever be conversant in the e-learning and learning design literature, but pairing a subject matter expert with a designer who does have a background in pedagogy can potentially help, at least with the design of the discussion forums. That said, it is also the case that many instructional designers obtain their master’s degrees and then become practitioners themselves and get further removed from the empirical literature base. Therefore, it is equally important to be sure that instructional designers stay connected with the current research in the field.

**Invest in faculty development.** Another similar area with the potential to help bridge the teacher/research gap is faculty development for online instructors. In a recent survey of practice (Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter, 2015), it was found that online courses are being taught by both full-time, on-campus faculty members and an increasing percentage of adjunct faculty members. The reality is that both of these groups who teach online may never work with instructional designers or have been trained in any sort of pedagogy. While this is certainly also true in face-to-face learning, it is an area that has received more emphasis in online learning. Magda, Poulin, & Clinefelter (2015) found that the professional development for online adjunct instructors varies greatly and is by no means a given. It stands to reason that if instructors do not receive training or education on the importance of appropriately designing and facilitating online discussions, these efforts might not be maximized to the best learning ends. Given the interest of this study in improving online learning, a renewed focus on faculty development makes sense. Additionally, one strategy is to position that development in terms of the ways in which teaching online is distinct from face-to-face teaching in order to be more appealing to experienced instructors.

**Improve discussion platforms.** While some of what the participants experienced as impediments is inherent to the nature of the activity—asynchronous, recorded, written—or in the realm of the
instructor in terms of forum structure and facilitation, much of these impediments lies within the
domain of the interface design. Students talked about difficult navigation, a non-intuitive interface, a lack
of social presence, and the need, because of system glitches, to work in an external program before
putting their post in the LMS. All of these things interfered with an experience of seamless
communication. Improving the usability and aesthetic experience of the discussion forum interface seems
important.

That said, it is not a non-trivial thing to impact the design of the LMS. In many universities, the
relationship between the faculty and IT is fractious (Salmon & Angood, 2013). At the same time, there is
a growing recognition of the need for universities to work with each other and educational technology
vendors in order to maximize the teaching and learning environment (Brown, Dehoney, & Millichap,
2015). Unizin is one example toward that ideal end (Straumsheim, 2014). Years ago, Pea and Moldonado
(2006) made a similar call for collaboration toward the end of a fruitful convergence between “between
the technical integration being pursued by industry, the research and development being advanced by the
learning sciences, and the wisdom of practice from K-12 educators” (p. 438). It would be easy to expand
that wisdom of practice to include Higher Education faculty members as well. Regardless of the specific
means, it seems undeniable that much of the online teaching and learning experience is shaped by the
technological environment, and if that environment is getting in the way of pedagogical goals, it would
make sense to attempt to work toward improvements.

Future Research

This was an exploratory, small study conducted in a single program, university, and LMS. It is a
line of research I hope to build upon. Some potential future research studies in this broad area of interest
that might be considered are briefly discussed here. First, it might be useful to use the same research
methods but study learners’ experiences with asynchronous online discussions in a hybrid rather than
fully online program. One of the key things that stood out throughout this research was the lack of a sense
of engagement among the learners, a lack of a sense of “real relationships.” It would be interesting to
conduct the same type of small, intensive qualitative study in a blended course where students also had the opportunity to interact in a synchronous manner face-to-face to see how their experiences of asynchronous online course discussions compared. It would also be potentially informative to do a similar study in programs of different curricula. Except for Course B, the majority of the courses in this study site tended to be relatively straightforward, where there were either correct answers or relevant experiences to share. What would these online course discussion experiences be like in a program that was more philosophical, theoretical, or inherently controversial?

Another research area that would potentially be fruitful would be a balanced mixed-methods study that leveraged all three predominant methodologies in this area: what learners say (content analysis), what learners do (LMS network analytic analysis), and what learners experience (interviews, focus groups, surveys). Most of this discussion forum research tends to be done either qualitatively with a bit of content analysis to supplement the findings or as content or network analysis with a bit of interviewing or surveying to supplement the findings. I think that given the persistence of challenges in this area and the number of studies that continue to be done, perhaps a novel approach that could lend new insights would equally leverage multiple methods. This would need to be a much larger, more complex study or longer term research project, probably involving multiple researchers wherein the “quality” of posts would be ascertained from a content analysis perspective and considered alongside LMS network analytics to paint a more thorough picture of the learners’ behaviors while in the system. That data would then be combined with rigorous qualitative methods to see how those “objective” findings compare to the “subjective” focus on students’ experiences.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this study considered online course discussions from within a relatively under-explored domain: that of learners’ experiences (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). This phenomenon was studied within a learner experience paradigm, based on that originally put forth by Dewey (1938) and more
recently revisited by instructional design scholars Parish, Wilson, and Dunlap (2011). Data collection relied primarily on Seidman’s (2013) three-interview sequence with each of eight individual graduate students currently enrolled in a fully online master’s program. This resulted in over 25 hours of interview data. The learners’ experiences as reported within the interviews were contextualized with an analysis of the program itself, two individual courses, and interviews with four of the program instructors. The data were analyzed in order to develop an individual case for each of the eight participants along with themes that could be discussed across the individual cases.

Individual cases were described along a continuum of those most enthusiastic about their discussions to those most critical of the experience. At one end of the continuum was Carmen, who expressed her view that the discussions were “very important,” while at the other end was Adele, who described continually being “underwhelmed by this method of interaction.” In addition to considering each participant as a unique case, the data were also analyzed for themes suggested across the individuals. These themes were considered in three broad categories: how learners experienced their online discussions; why they tended to have those types of experiences; and what they experienced as the purposes of the discussions. To briefly summarize, students described the nature of their online course discussions as an experience quite particular to the online course environment and one that was often approached as a “going through the motions” deliverable. Their descriptions suggested both implicitly and explicitly that they had these types of experiences because of insufficient instructor facilitation, the specifics of the assignment requirements, the inherent nature of asynchronous, text-based, recorded communication, and the limitations of the discussion forum interface itself. Notably, however, except for one participant, all of the participants would keep online discussions as part of the courses in the program and regarded them as having some value in areas of group process, social connection, and idea articulation.

The findings confirmed what much of the content and network analysis literature has suggested over the years (e.g., Ertmer et al., 2011; Garrison et al., 2001; Gunawardena et al., 1997; Kanuka et al.,
While most participants described the value the discussions brought to their learning, they all also felt they could be better. This study also suggests a need to re-think our common conceptualization of online discussions from within a face-to-face discussion framework. In terms of practical implications, this study emphasized the need for a strong instructor presence in online course discussions, continuing to make sure empirically supported best practices for design and teaching are communicated across the research-practice divide, and the importance of improving the LMS discussion forum interface such that it affords positive engaged experiences. Lastly, future research possibilities including an application of this study’s methods in a hybrid course and a course of a different curriculum or topic as well as a larger, balanced mixed methods approach were suggested.

This study did not attempt to measure learning or evaluate the efficacy of different pedagogical approaches in online course discussions. Rather, it offered a qualitative description of the learners’ experiences from their own perspectives. Importantly, this qualitative description is not being offered in a vacuum. As with all studies, this one took place as part of a larger research conversation pertaining to asynchronous online course discussions. This research conversation has been taking place at least since Henri’s (1992) excitement pertaining to “draw[ing] the marrow from the bones” of the discussion forum postings in order to better understand the learning processes at play (p. 119). As described in the Literature Review, this research conversation has also involved a number of content analysis studies considering the quality of online discussions and various design and facilitation strategies through an evaluation of the content of the discussions themselves (see, for example, Bai, 2012; Bassani, 2011; Choi, Land, & Turgeon, 2008; Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011; Ertmer, Sadef, & Ertmer, 2011; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007; Stegmann, Weinberger, & Fischer, 2007; Wise & Chiu, 2011; Wise, Saghaifian, & Padmanabhan, 2012). This research conversation has also increasingly included studies that emphasize not just what is written in the discussions but also, through leveraging LMS data analytics, what is done by learners in the discussion forum space itself (see, for example, Gulati, 2008; Lee 2012; Oliver & Shaw, 2003; Palmer, Holt, & Bray, 2007; Wise et al., 2013). What this research
conversation has largely lacked, however, are rigorous, non-superficial explorations of the learners’ experiences from the perspectives of the learners themselves (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007). Ultimately, I assume that the learning efficacy of asynchronous online discussions will be maximized when they are considered holistically, with an equal emphasis on what learners say, do, and experience when participating in this increasingly common online course learning activity. In addition to the literature gap regarding how learners experience their online course discussions, this study was also motivated by the practical need to improve online course discussion quality given the importance of the LMS discussion space as the primary site for educational dialogue (Anderson & Dron, 2012; Gorsky & Caspi, 2005), ongoing faculty concerns regarding the quality of online interactions (Edmundson, 2012; Jaschik & Lederman, 2014; Lederman & Jaschik, 2013), and the continued exponential growth of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2013, 2015). It is with regard to both the research and practice domains that I hope this study will meaningfully contribute.
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Appendix A

Recruiting Emails

Learner email

Help improve online learning:

Hello! Please join my research project to help make online learning better! There is relatively little educational research done that talks in depth to the key stakeholders of the process: YOU, the actual students. I’m a PhD candidate and am conducting research on dialogue in online graduate programs with the goal of making online learning better. I am reaching out to you for help. If you are a fully online master’s degree student in the [program name] program and have completed at least one graduate course that included asynchronous discussions within [LMS NAME], I invite you to participate in this study that focuses on your experiences with online course discussions. In order to do this research, I will meet with you virtually up to three times, at your convenience, in order to learn about your experiences and perspectives on your online course discussions.

For each interview you complete with me, you will receive a $10 Amazon gift card. If you complete all of the interviews, you will also be enrolled to win a $50 Amazon gift card. This is a small, qualitative study so your chances of winning are quite good!

To find out more about the study or to agree to participate, please contact me directly at axg251@psu.edu; 814-206-6642 or click here https://pennstate.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_6LjS9tes8aCx4Sp

If you have any questions about the research, please contact me at axg251@psu.edu or (814) 206-6642.

Thank you for your time -- I hope that you can volunteer in the study!

Andrea

Instructor email

Share the instructor perspective:

Hello! I'm currently conducting a research study exploring learners' experiences with their online course discussions. While there is a lot of research about online discussions, very little of it involves directly talking to the learners. I would like to contextualize this data by also talking to you: the course instructors (and often course authors).

This is an exempt study with IRB approval. If you'd be willing to participate, please let me know. Here is an executive summary: https://docs.google.com/document/d/179MY6A9vju0J9iRJuP53ASUnY1KMQr02LF8yPrW6D0/edit#

Thanks!
Andrea
Appendix B

Demographic Survey

*Learner participants were invited to fill out this online survey before the first interview.

1. What is your name?

2. What would you like your pseudonym to be? (This is the name that will be used to protect your confidentiality.)

3. Please list the fully online courses you have **completed** for the master’s degree prior to this semester and when you took each. (If you can't remember the exact semester, an approximation is fine.)

4. Please list the online courses you are enrolled in for the SU15 semester.

5. Please indicate any other fully online learning experiences.

6. What is your employment status? (check one: full time, part time, not currently employed)

7. What is your marital status? (check one: married/partnered, single, other)

8. What is your living situation? (check one: children in the home full time, children in the home part time, no children in the home)

9. In what state do you currently reside? (Or country if not in U.S.)

10. What is your country of origin?

11. What is your native language?

12. What is your age?

13. What is your race/ethnicity?

14. What is your sex/gender?
Appendix C

Interview One Guide – Focused Life History

*NOTE: There is a lot of detail below that was used for my own guidance. I did not necessarily ask all of these questions, enforce this strict order, nor use this direct wording. Rather, this guide was developed in alignment with my personal work style (arguably, “type A”) to make sure that major areas were addressed and that I was comfortable proceeding in my role. These semi-structured interviews proceeded as suggested by leading interview experts as “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31).

Intro Script:
"Thank you so much for participating in this project. I'm conducting this research because there is so little actually known about learners’ authentic experiences from their perspectives in dialogue and online discussions. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk to you. I want to give you a little sense of the structure so you know why I'm asking to meet with you multiple times. In this, our first meeting, I'm hoping to learn as much as possible about who you are in terms of your experiences before enrolling in this program. In our next meeting, we'll talk about your actual experiences with dialogue and discussions in the program, and then finally in the third, I hope to learn as much as possible from you about what the experiences mean to you in the larger context of your life. This is going to be semi-structured and will hopefully feel more like a conversation. I have a few areas I want to make sure I learn about from you, but it’s okay if we jump around. Really, I am hoping to learn as much as possible about you from your perspectives. One important disclaimer before we start, I am totally and completely interested in your actual experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. I have no vested interest in you giving me the "right" answer in any way. Any feelings or thoughts that you share—positive, negative, neutral—are going to be helpful to me from a research perspective. There is so little research that actually talks to live students about their experiences. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?"

Logistics:
• Make sure they completed the informed consent.
• Reference that I have/don’t have their completed demographic survey.

[Basic information]
• As I said a bit ago, the main purpose of this interview is for me to learn more about you. Could you spend a little time telling me about yourself? Anything you’d like to share in terms of your life: home life, work life, school life. [Want to get a better picture of how school fits into his/her life. What is the larger context of their life in which they are participating in this online master’s program?]
• Could you walk me through a typical week in your life? I’d like to get a good picture of how you balance and prioritize everything you have going on – work, school, family, and other activities. [Follow up – when/where do they typically do their schoolwork? Realistically, how much are they able to focus on it?]

[Current goals and experiences in the program]
• How did you come to be enrolled in this Master’s program? [follow up: What are your goals for the program – both learning-wise and pragmatically in terms of potential career advancement]
• Before you started the program, what were your expectations of the program? [Follow up if they don’t address it: What were their expectations of how they would interact with classmates and their instructor throughout the program?]
• How have your actual experiences compared to your expectations? [Follow up: How have your experiences in this program compared to your previous educational experiences?]

[Educational history – including other online]
• Next I want to learn more about your educational history. Can you tell me about your college and other educational experiences before this program? [focus: mostly on college and after, major, types of experiences, etc.]
• You indicated on the demographic survey that you have had/haven’t had previous online learning experiences – could you talk a little more about that?

[Broad discussion experiences/perspectives]
• When I say the term “class discussion” what comes to mind for you? [Both face-to-face and online] I am coming to realize that people have very different conceptions of that term so I want to describe how I’m going to be using it throughout the rest of this research. Face-to-face class discussions would be a discussion of any size – small group or whole class – that took place within a class and involved the instructor and students (it might also involve the instructor breaking students off into their own groups to discuss). Basically it’s a discussion rather than just a lecture and listening – where students have the opportunity to interact with other students.
Online, I’m specifically referring to the course discussions that take place within [LMS NAME] where you are asked to discuss with your classmates and possibly instructor (it involves putting in “new posts” and “replies” to other posts.)
• Reflecting on your time in college and other educational experiences before your experiences in this current program, what were you experiences in discussions? [Follow up: Did you have small group discussions? What were the topics like? How were the discussions facilitated? Were they discussions with “right” answers, conceptual engagements, experience sharing, etc.?]
• What do they think is the purpose of class discussions in general? Are they necessary?
• How do you interact online outside of class discussions? [Follow up: how do you use social media – Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, discussing on blogs, discussions at the end of news sites, etc.]

[Learner identity]
• If a good friend were to describe the type of student you are, what would she or he say?
• How would you describe yourself as a student?
• How would you describe yourself as a learner? [Follow up: what motivates you as a learner? How do you find that grades impact your approach to your schoolwork?]
• In general, what do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of online learning?

[Closing]
• In our next interview, we’re going to go in depth into your specific experiences in your online discussions. Before we end for today, is there anything else you’d like to add about yourself, your prior educational experiences, or your experiences so far in this program that you think would be helpful for me to know?
• In the next interview, I’m going to ask you to open up a discussion forum from one of your courses. Would you be willing to screen share with me? I’d like you to walk me through how you navigate your course and your discussion forum and do a bit of a modified talk-aloud protocol so I can better understand what you are thinking/doing as you participate.
Appendix D

Interview Two Protocol – Details of the Experience

*NOTE: There is a lot of detail below that was used for my own guidance. I did not necessarily ask all of these questions, enforce this strict order, nor use this direct wording. Rather, this guide was developed in alignment with my personal work style (arguably, “type A”) to make sure that major areas were addressed and that I was comfortable proceeding in my role. These semi-structured interviews proceeded as suggested by leading interview experts as “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31).

Script
"Thank you so much for participating in this project. Last time we started to talk about your past educational experiences, online experiences, and discussion experiences. The purpose of this interview is to explore in more detail your recent specific experiences with online discussions. The format will be similar to the previous interview in that I have a few structured questions but will definitely ask follow ups and encourage you to share as we go. Again, there are no right or wrong answers in any way. I should also add that some people have commented that because of where I work that they are worried about offending me with things they say. I am absolutely open to hearing your honest feedback about the courses, the LMS, faculty interactions, etc. This research only really works if I learn about your real experiences. Whatever your experiences are, they will be valid here. If you tell me you read every post twice and find these the highlight of your course, great! If you tell me you actually never read the posts and only post the bare minimum, great! If you tell me you love [the LMS], you hate [the LMS], it’s all great information for me. I cannot emphasize enough how helpful it will be for me to know in detail your thoughts and feelings regarding your experiences.”

[Be sure to have participant document open with their demographic survey and participant summary information to refer back]

Please open [Course A]

• Okay, we’ll start with that one. With as much detail as possible, could you please walk me through a typical week/unit/lesson in that course? How did you approach the work, determine what to do when, etc.
  ○ Where do you go first?
  ○ Steps in participating?
  ○ How long did you typically spend?
  ○ How many times per week did you tend to log in?

• Now let’s focus in on how you participated in the discussion for that class. Again, with as much detail as possible, could you please talk me through your participation in an online discussion during a typical week/unit/lesson that one was a part of the course?
  ○ How many times did you log in?
  ○ How did you compose your responses?
  ○ Did you post first or read others’ postings first?
  ○ How did you determine what to read/what to skip?
  ○ Did you do the reading first?
  ○ Did you type it in Word?
  ○ How did you determine who to respond to?
• When you were authoring your initial posts, what was your thought process? How did you go about it? Did you feel like you were speaking to anyone in particular? Who was your audience? In general? Did you get the feeling that people were reading your posts? **How do you decide where to author?**

• When you were reading other posts, what was your thought process? How did you determine what you would read and in what order? Did you feel like you were “listening” (Wise) to someone? If not, can you describe what it felt like? **How do you decide what to read and in what order?**

• When you were responding to other posts, what was your thought process? How did you go about it? Did you feel like you were speaking directly to the post to which you were replying? Or to someone else? **How do you decide what to respond to?**

• How did your instructor participate in the class discussion?
  - How often?
  - What types of things did he/she say?
  - How did you respond to your instructor’s postings?
  - How did it seem to impact the discussion?
  - Do you think that your instructor read all of the posts?

• What was the structure for participation like in this course?
  - Was it required?
  - How much was it worth?
  - How often did you have to respond?
  - To how many people?
  - Due dates?
  - Length?
  - Citations?

• How did that structure impact or influence your participation throughout the discussion?

• What topics were you asked to discuss?
  - What would a typical discussion be about?
  - Were there specific question prompts or something else?
  - Did the discussions require that you do other class readings? (If so, did you typically do them?)

• So far, we’ve only talked in depth about your [Course A] experience. I’d like you now to think [if they’ve taken more than one] about another course that also included discussions. Can you talk about how similar or different it was to the one we’ve just been discussing? **In what ways?**

• As you know I’ve asked you to focus on discussions that took place within the [LMS name] discussion forum. Can you please talk in as much detail as possible about what it was like to participate within that interface? [Again, if it helps to open an actual discussion, please do so.] [If they have trouble understanding this question, compare it to room design and the idea that the layout of the table and the chairs – whether students are gathered in a circle or sitting in rows, all of that matters. The same design principles can apply to an online interface. It can shape and
impact your experience. How did the [LMS name] discussion forum interface design, shape and impact your experience?

• Let’s talk about some social media interfaces. Do you use Facebook, Twitter, Yammer, Instagram, comments on the end of news articles, etc. What do you use and how do you use them? You don’t need to screen share this with me but if you could open one that you typically use for your own reference. Now return to the [LMS name] interface. Talk to me about what you are thinking/feeling about the look, feel, and functionality. In what ways have your [LMS name] experiences been similar? In what ways have your [LMS name] experiences been different?

• Is there anything else you’d like to share at this point about your experiences with online discussions in your course(s) in this program? Anything that you think is important for me to know?

“Again, thank you so much for your participation today! Today was a lot of discussion about your concrete experiences with these discussions. In our third and final interview, I will ask you to talk more about your reflections on these experiences – more about your thoughts and feelings.”
Appendix E

Interview Three Guide – Reflections on the Meaning

*NOTE: There is a lot of detail below that was used for my own guidance. I did not necessarily ask all of these questions, enforce this strict order, nor use this direct wording. Rather, this guide was developed in alignment with my personal work style (arguably, “type A”) to make sure that major areas were addressed and that I was comfortable proceeding in my role. These semi-structured interviews proceeded as suggested by leading interview experts as “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31).

“In the first interview, I got to learn about you. Some about your educational experience (undergraduate, graduate), your previous online learning experiences, and the current context of your life in terms of work/school/family/other activities balance. We also talked about why you were enrolled in this program, what your expectations were and how it compared. We also started talking about your past discussion experiences, your social media experiences, and your views on the role of discussion in learning.

Then in the second interview, I asked you to screen share with me and walk through a typical week in [Course A] focusing specifically on how you approached and participated in your required discussions for that week. You also compared that discussion with other discussions that you’ve had in other courses. [This was typically Appreciative Inquiry].

This third interview is formally described as “Reflections on the Meaning.” The goal for today is for me to learn as much as possible from you about the meaning and impact of these experiences - asynchronous course discussions throughout the program so far – in the context of your life.

Before we begin – and like all of the interviews prior – I have a set of standard questions, but we will naturally jump around and I will have follow up questions: I wanted to again thank you so much for your work with me. This is a small, qualitative research project and I literally could not be gleaning the insights I am without your work to date.

Do you have any questions before we begin?”

New Thoughts since last interview:

• Before I ask you to start reflecting on your program’s online discussions generally, I know that between interviews new thoughts can emerge. When we last met, I asked you a number of questions about your specific experiences within [Course A] and a little bit within your other courses. I want to open by giving you the chance to share any reflections that may have come up between our previous interviews and this one in regards to your specific experiences with asynchronous online discussions in the program?

Your experience of discussions in this program:

• If a friend was considering enrolling in this program and asked what the experience of participating in the online discussions was like (they’ve never done any online course discussions), how would you describe the experience? What does it feel like to participate in your threaded discussions? Use the language you would with a good friend, please. [Follow ups]
  o How is the experience similar to and different from writing a Microsoft word paper and submitting it for a class? (gets at research that suggests they are unconnected monologues)
“Speaking” and “Listening”: Participating in a face-to-face class discussion is another experience? (gets at Wise who makes metaphor of talking/listening)

Participating on an online social media site (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)? (not sure which researcher to link it with except that LMSs are generally trying to go to a more social media like look, feel, and functionality)

Is there any other activity you would compare your experiences to?

Dialogue and Discussion: So far, we’ve been talking about the activity of course discussions. I’m going to use another term and ask you what it means to you: “dialogue.” Another researcher who writes not about online discussions but about dialogue and learning generally, talks about the importance of dialogue as a relationship among individuals, as something that participants experience themselves “entering into” (Burbules, 1993). Where in participating in a dialogue, you feel a sense of connection and authentic engagement to the conversation, to each other. Something that involves both thoughts and feelings.

Please talk about how your experiences in your current program discussions compare to that notion. [And don’t be shy about totally disagreeing if that hasn’t taken place for you.]

Learners’ experiences:

- In an ideal course discussion situation, what would your experiences participating in your course discussions be?
- What would it feel like? What would you do? How would you participate?
- How would you communicate with your classmates?
- What would the role of argumentation/critical discourse/productive disagreement be?
- How have your experiences in the program compared to this?

Discussion Quality

Your perspective – defining discussion quality

- When talking about online course discussions, what does “quality” mean to you? (What does it look like? What does it feel like?)
- By contrast, what does “low quality” mean?

Instructor & Researcher Perspectives – their definitions of discussion quality

- How do you think your definition of discussion quality compares to the expectations of your instructors? How do you think they would describe a quality discussion? In contrast, how do you think they would describe a low quality discussion?
- What do you think your instructors in this program hope takes place in the course discussions that you’ve participated in thus far?
- What types of experiences – affective and cognitive – do you think they want students to be having?
- A lot of people who study online discussions argue that overall students participating don’t achieve desired levels of critical, deep, or higher order thinking, which is how they define discussion quality. Do you agree with this? Why or why not?

Your experiences of quality in discussions in this program

- Please talk overall about the quality of the course discussions as you’ve experienced them thus far throughout this program.
- Do any examples come to mind from any of your classes of really high quality and really low quality discussions?
• In terms of evaluating the importance from a learning perspective of the variety of activities you’ve engaged in throughout your current program, how would you compare your required discussions? [Which activities are better? Which activities are worse?]

**Your design for discussions in a [program] course**

• Do you think your [program] course discussions could be better than they currently are?
• What do you think keeps your current [program] discussions from achieving that ideal situation?
• If you were designing and teaching a course in the [program] program, would you include discussions? Why or why not?
• Would they be required?
• What would your expectations be for how students participated? For what students experienced (thoughts and feelings)? (Would you expect them to read all of the posts? How many would you expect them to reply to? How often throughout the week would you expect them to participate in the discussion?)
• How would you structure them in terms of the topics for discussion (e.g., give prompts, have them create prompts, something else)?
• How would you grade them? What percentage of the final grade would they be worth?
• How would you participate as the course instructor?
• Anything else about how, as the instructor, would design and facilitate the discussions?
• Now, what about the blogs? [Repeat above or see if this changes their response to how they would structure the discussions.]

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**This program as a whole**

• Do you think it’s important to have discussions in every course in the program? Can you talk about how you would design/facilitate them differently for each course?

**Most important feedback:** If your instructors and others involved in course design learn nothing else from this research from your perspective as a student, what is the most important thing you want them to know about the learner experience of online course discussions from your perspective?

**Anything else?** Before we close, is there anything else that you want to share pertaining to your experiences with online discussions in your program?

**Reporting on this data:** Before we close, I wanted to let you know that anything I present/publish on from this data will use a pseudonym for your name. Given the various contexts in which I’ll be sharing the data, in many cases, it might not be possible to have a believable pseudonym for the program:

• Do you have any concerns about being described as a student in the program?
• And, some people might be able to tell from the descriptions of the courses, in some cases which course was being discussed. I won’t name the course but just give general descriptions. Do you have any concerns about that?
• I hope it’s okay if I email you if I have any follow up clarification questions as I’m going through everything.
• Lastly, do you think you’d consider giving consent for me to review your posts in the courses you’ve taken thus far? (You don’t have to decide right now but I’m realizing it might improve the research. If I were going to do that, I’d ask you to fill out another consent form and I wouldn’t look at any posts unless you agreed)

**Thank you!** Thanks again for your participation. As a reminder, you’ll now be added to the raffle for the $50!
Appendix F

Instructor Interviews Guide

*NOTE: There is a lot of detail below that was used for my own guidance. I did not necessarily ask all of these questions, enforce this strict order, nor use this direct wording. Rather, this guide was developed in alignment with my personal work style (arguably, “type A”) to make sure that major areas were addressed and that I was comfortable proceeding in my role. These semi-structured interviews proceeded as suggested by leading interview experts as “neither an open everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire” (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, p. 31).

Intro Script:
"Thank you so much for participating in this project. I'm conducting this research because there is so little actually known about learners’ authentic experiences from their perspectives in dialogue and online discussions. I'm really excited to have the opportunity to talk to you since it’s equally important to get the instructor perspective on this to contextualize the students’ experience. I do work at [workplace] and I know that made at least a few students wary about the openness of their feedback so I’ll give an important disclaimer: I am totally and completely interested in your actual experiences, beliefs, and perspectives. I have no vested interest in you giving me the "right" answer in any way. Any feelings or thoughts that you share—positive, negative, neutral—are going to be helpful to me from a research perspective. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?"

Logistics:
• Make sure they completed the informed consent.

Focused Life History:
• What is your background with online teaching and learning? (Have you taught online before? What training did you receive? Have you ever been an online learner? Have you had experiences with online discussions before this program?)

• What do you believe are the strengths and weaknesses of online learning generally?

• Specifically, what do you experience as the benefits and drawbacks of teaching online compared to teaching face-to-face?

• How online learners compare to residence learners (if she’s noticed anything)?

• What is your role with the program? (Full time instructor? Part time instructor? Which courses do you teach? Did you design the course you are teaching? How often?)

Details of the Experience & Reflections on the Meaning:
• Of the courses in the program that you have taught, please discuss your experiences with the online course discussions. (How often do you log in and look at the discussions? Do you read every post? How do you participate? How do you grade them?)

• Please describe your observations in terms of how students have participated in the discussions. (frequency, quality, communication culture, argumentation/critical discourse, level of depth, etc.)
• What do you define as a high quality discussion? How do you recognize quality in discussions? What about low quality?

• What has your experience been with the level of quality in the online discussions in the courses in the [program] you’ve taught?

• If a colleague, who had never taught a course with asynchronous online course discussions, was considering teaching online for the program and asked you to describe the experience of online course discussions from the instructor perspective, how would you explain them?
  
  o How is the experience similar to and different from reading and grading a Microsoft Word paper and submitting it for a class? (gets at research that suggests they are unconnected monologues)
  
  o “Speaking” and “Listening”: Participating in a face-to-face class discussion is another experience? (gets at Wise who makes metaphor of talking/listening)
  
  o Participating on an online social media site (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)? (not sure which researcher to link it with except that LMSs are generally trying to go to a more social media like look, feel, and functionality)
  
  o Is there any other activity you would compare the experiences to?

**Dialogue and Discussion:** So far, we’ve been talking about the activity of course discussions. I’m going to use another term and ask you what it means to you: “dialogue.” Another researcher who writes not about online discussions but about dialogue and learning generally, talks about the importance of dialogue as a relationship among individuals, as something that participants experience themselves “entering into” (Burbules, 1993). Where in participating in a dialogue, you feel a sense of connection and authentic engagement to the conversation, to each other. Something that involves both thoughts and feelings.
  
  o Please talk about how your experiences in your program discussions compare to that notion. [And don’t be shy about totally disagreeing if that hasn’t taken place for you.]

• What do you see as the specific pedagogical purpose of the required course discussions in [LMS name] (How does this compare to the pedagogical purpose of the blogs? How does this compare to the pedagogical purpose of discussions in face-to-face classes? Do you think discussions are required for learning?)

• What do you think the instructor’s role should be with the asynchronous discussions in [LMS name] (reading posts, frequency, type of participation, grading, etc.)

• Why do you think this level of interaction (or not) is important and how do you think it impacts the student experience?

• How do you think your colleagues in the program interact with their students and participate in their online course discussions?

• Similarly, what do you think the students’ role should be with the course discussions? (reading posts, frequency, type of participation, grading, etc.)

• Do you think the online course discussions could be better? (If so, what do you think could be done to improve the quality of the online course discussions?)
• If students were to take away one thing from your perspective about their participation in online course discussions, what would it be?

• What else would you like to share about online course discussions?

Closing:
• Thank you again. The instructor perspective is crucial for contextualizing the student experience. So, I really appreciate your participation in this.
• I will use a pseudonym for your name.
• Are you comfortable if the program itself is identified?
• Is it okay if I follow up through email with any additional questions?
Appendix G

Example of Participant Memo

Abby

- completed:
  - fall 14,
  - fall 14,
  - spring 15,
  - spring 15
- currency
  - 5 (SU15)
  - 8 (SU15)

NOTES FROM INTERVIEW:

Work/Life context: Married. Stepson who’s with them part-time. Work at same job for 17

Fitting school in: Try to finish everything during the week but doesn’t always happen.

Discussion: Talked about herself as a person who is comfortable speaking up in discussions. Gets annoyed when others talk just to hear themselves. Has to go to training at work for work and this happens. Believes discussions are necessary for learning. Believes you don’t get enough out of just reading – discussions give you additional clarification.

Undergraduate/Other prior education: UG at--. Started at UGA at --- got all 60-credits but didn’t finish internship. Because of life events. Hadn’t realized there was a 7 year limit so she “timed out” of the program.

Why C? Did this program because it overlapped with her work.

Googling programs – originally looking for U27 ( ), but found this online and it matched (could finish in 2 years).

Expectations and Reality: Wasn’t really sure what to expect – thought it might be very rewarding. Liked this better. Had to do more with own work which is difficult.
Appendix H

Sample* Codes and Code Memos

*NOTE: This is just a sample of initial codes and code memos that I used as I was working through the data to familiarize myself deeply with my participants and their experiences. The counts are included to show transparency in my process, not to suggest objective weighting of importance. These are examples of “first cycle coding methods” (Saldaña, 2013) and include an intentional mix of different types of codes like descriptive and structural codes (Saldaña, 2013).

[Image of a software interface showing code systems and counts]
Appendix I

Analytic Memo – Searching for Themes

Themes/Discussion:
1. Instructor role (Nandi et al. (2012a), Mazzoni & ... (find)) [Dig deeper into how they compared the 2 courses and the role of the instructor.]
2. Purpose of discussion differs (among students and instructors) (Rourke & Kanuka (2007); Nandi et al. (2012a)). Seeing something as an independent deliverable notably different than participating actively (checking daily) the discussions.
3. Assignment specifics shaping (or nearly wholly determining) what they do (Nandi et al. (2012), Lee, Gulati, (find from initial lit review)
4. Connection, engagement, “real” conversation not happening (for the most part) (Rourke & Kanuka, 2007).
5. Less emphasis on interface than expected: (expect it to be boring) [maybe do a print screen of]
6. Students want engagement, intellectual community, something more. Even among those students who regard the activity as “check off the box” or “going through the motions” seemed to sincerely want engagement in an intellectual community. This is important as it wasn’t necessarily a motivation factor on the part of the students but rather the experience itself that informed how they regarded the discussions. [What they wanted to happen versus what they experienced happening was very different.]
7. Experience of typing, asynchronous, formal questions - makes it less a “discussion” or “dialogue.” Maybe we’re using the wrong words to describe what’s happening here? It’s based on a metaphor but maybe the metaphor just doesn’t work.
8. Typing may not be the right theme here. Maybe it’s written word? The process of producing the written word? And there are multiple categories emerging from this. (1) The physical labor of typing. (2) What’s lost in a communicative sense without voice, face, etc. (3) The different perceptions of words being written down. [Way said “politically correct” multiple times. This sense of the stakes being higher with what you say. Having to be more careful.] 9. Pairs, versus groups, versus individual “checking off box”: talked throughout that her experience was more individual discussions (like between 2 people) than a group discussion. She emphasized this repeatedly. It really seemed to shape her experience. [I’m not sure if she was unique in this or it was just that she made it very explicit in her descriptions. Interestingly, she did still seem to experience it as a “discussion” between two people where Adele seemed much more removed from it. She kept emphasizing that she saw herself as a “traditional” learner and regarding the discussions as a “deliverable.” She seemed to be missing any sense of an actual “discussion” taking place between 2 or more people. (Her experience more aligned with the individual disconnected monologues description in some article.) In contrast, ... seemed pretty enthusiastic consistently about the experience of it as a class discussion. The theme seems to be how they experience the activity in terms of interacting with no one (just submitting a deliverable), interacting specifically with the person they respond to (or whom responds to them), and interacting with the whole class. This connects to Burbules concept of dialogue as something you “enter into.” Can someone be cognitively engaged if they only feel the experience as individual? (Meaning the process of articulating their thoughts is the learning activity itself — it seems like this was much more consistent with the blogs.)
10. Blogs as point of comparison. While I did not initially intend to focus on blogs as part of the research, they emerged naturally as an area of discussion by the students since they were required in most of the courses that the participants had experienced. For the most part they had even less “interactivity” than the discussion forums (if you count responses) but I think were generally regarded as more impactful (would need to look at how the participants placed them when ranking the activities in terms of their impact.)
11. Effort required on students’ part to “listen”: In a f2f class, while it might be relatively “easy” to zone out and not fully concentrate on what’s being said, not attend to deeper meaning, etc. [research on hearing versus listening] to actually not physically hear anything that is being said [assuming an audience of hearing enabled students] requires effort and potential physical intervention (e.g. physically leaving the room or blocking one’s ears) in order to not hear what is being said. The situation in the online discussion is nearly opposite when considered from the perspective of student effort. In order to actively participate — to “listen” to what is being “said” by other students—in an initial post, a response to another post, etc.—requires physical action on the part of the student. Whereas in a f2f class, the default with no intervention heurist sits there is “listening” in an online discussion the default with no
Reviewing Themes
Andrea Gregg

EDUCATION

PhD, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Learning, Design, and Technology, May 2016
*Online graduate students’ experiences with asynchronous course discussions* (GPA 3.96/4.00)
Nominated for AECT’s Robert M. Gagne Award for Graduate Student Research in Instructional Design

Masters of Arts, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA
Speech Communication, August 2000
University Graduate Fellowship with a Graduate Scholar Award (GPA 3.93/4.00)

Bachelor of Arts, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL
Graduated with Highest Distinction (top 2% of the class), June 1996
Double Major: Math and History
Phi Beta Kappa; Honors in History; Hearst Scholarship in History; Dean’s list (GPA 3.91/4.00)

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Manager of Instructional Design, The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus (2/12 – present)
Senior Instructional Designer, The Pennsylvania State University, World Campus (1/2008 – 1/2012)

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS & PRESENTATIONS


Gregg, A. (2015, November). *What we really know about online discussions: Learners’ experiences as missing piece of research puzzle*. Paper presented at AECT, Indianapolis, IN.


PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Article Reviewer for the *Journal of Open, Flexible and Distance Learning* (8/2012 – present)
Interviewed for: What learning object repositories can mean for your program. (2010, October). *Distance Education Report, 14*(19).