THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ONLINE COLLEGE STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLE AND RESPONSE TO LITERATURE

by

Katie Elizabeth Robinson

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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ABSTRACT

Students entering the "Composition and Literature" classroom find themselves presented with a number of challenges as they learn to analyze literature beyond reader comprehension. The online learner experiences even more obstacles while approaching an often-difficult curriculum without the guidance of a residential instructor. For this reason, the online learner must adapt and develop autonomy in learning. Reader Response literary critics place great emphasis on the reader while determining meaning in a text, and Louise Rosenblatt explored the connection between the reader and the text in her Transactional Theory. To assist online learners in their endeavor, this study aimed to determine a relationship between students' learning styles with the *Felder Index of Learning Styles* and students' response to literature with the *Literary Response Questionnaire*. Using a Chi-square, a statistically very strong relationship was found between learning style and approach to literature as well as gender and approach to literature.

Keywords: college composition, composition and literature, higher education, correlation study, Felder ILS, LQR, Literary Response Questionnaire, online, adult learner.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As students enter the "Composition and Literature" post-secondary class, they find themselves presented with a number of challenges as they learn to analyze literature beyond reading comprehension. These students are attempting to learn new ways to think critically and make arguments about the literature as opposed to just understanding the surface-level meaning of a text (Sanoff, 2006). The online learner experiences even more obstacles while approaching an often-difficult curriculum without the guidance of a residential instructor. For this reason, the online learner must adapt and develop autonomy in learning. These online students must "learn to learn" and develop metacognitive skills (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; Flavell, 1979; Lin & Lehman, 2001). Just as some educational theorists focus on the student's experience in learning (Banyard & Hayes, 1994; Rogers, 1996), Reader Response literary critics place great emphasis on the reader while determining meaning in a text. Louise Rosenblatt explored the connection between the reader and the text in her Transactional Theory by stating that meaning can be found in the transaction that occurs during the event of reading—and so meaning is developed from the reader's background, the text itself, and the exchange between the two in the process of reading (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 17). This study aims to determine a relationship between students' learning styles with the *Felder Index of Learning Styles* and students' responses to literature with the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

Background

As online students step into post-secondary education, they are asked to complete work at a higher level with more complex academic rigor. Additionally, these online students are often asked to complete this task without working closely with an instructor face-to-face, requiring autonomy and a self-awareness of one's thought process. However, colleges and universities

note a growing number of students (both residential and online) entering the post-secondary school unprepared for the challenges that they will face, particularly in reading and math (Bettinger, Long, & National Bureau of Economic Research, C. A., 2005). Furthermore, with the growth of online education, more students are gaining access to post-secondary education. These students come from just as many various backgrounds as geographical regions. Many diverse students with different needs, previous educational experiences, and levels of preparedness for college work, may experience difficulty analyzing texts. Because they are unaware of the process of interacting with and responding to literature, they find it difficult to apply critical thinking skills when reading a text. When faced with difficult-to-understand literature, conducting strong literary analysis can be difficult at best (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Booth, 1983; Glenn & Goldthwaite, 2008; Graff, 2000; Lilla, 1998), even for graduate-level English majors. Eckert (2008) pointed out that students are all too often taught how to read the surface of a text instead of "critically engaging with textual material" (p. 111). Although students are taught in high school how to comprehend literature, it is demanded in college that they critically analyze it.

When a person reads a text, the individual engages in the act of interpreting to arrive at its meaning. But how a reader arrives at an interpretation has proved to be problematic. Literary theorists have argued for decades concerning how that meaning can be determined, i.e., who holds "authority" over the true meaning of a text. There seems to be no shortage of opinions on the matter. For example, a traditional approach to literature finds meaning in the authority of the author. But that approach was abandoned by T. S. Eliot (1922) who established New Criticism by proclaiming that the text should stand on its own and determine the meaning of a text. Later, in the 1960s and through the 1980s, critics such as Roland Barthes (1967) and Stanley Fish

(1980) argued that meaning lay with the reader's individual interpretation, thus bringing about what has been labeled Reader Response criticism. This theory holds that just as every reader is a unique individual with a separate background, each student approaches a text in a different way specific to their learning preference. Bagwell (1983) reviewed Stanley Fish's stance on a reader's predisposed approach to texts in saying that "interpretive constraints are in effect prior to consciousness" (p. 127), indicating that there is something deeper to be explored in the reader than just the text itself. And so the discussion over meaning, and how to determine meaning, goes on. Into this arena of competing theories wanders the online student.

In the online environment, students must understand how their backgrounds impact how they process information (Ceballos, 2009; Furst-Bowe, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). A student's learning style can greatly impact how that student responds to a text. Understanding the connection between students' learning preferences and how they respond to literature can greatly help instructors when guiding students in analyzing literature while also pushing the student to expand his or her perspectives and critical thinking skills. Because of the importance of the place of "Composition and Literature" courses within the higher education system, students' learning preferences should be considered when presenting them with the foundations of literary response.

The process of parroting back the plot of a text can be considered the process of obtaining and demonstrating reading comprehension. As students enter the college literature classroom, they are asked to go a step beyond establishing reading comprehension. Instead, students are asked to analyze texts and support their claims with evidence. By understanding how a student responds to literature, that student is able to meta-cognitively develop and sharpen already-existing analytical and critical thinking skills.

Most colleges require that students take a "Composition and Literature" course, or a course that requires them to write essays analyzing literature, as a part of their general education requirement. From there, colleges often require that students take a 200-level literature course to further develop these analytic skills. However, if students are not provided with the proper challenges or do not receive an appropriate understanding of how to analyze literature, they will not be successful in the 200-level English course. Additionally, the analytic skills that students acquire in English class can cross over to other disciplines. These critical thinking abilities seem more applicable to the humanities; however, problem solving expands across the curriculum.

Problem Statement

This study aimed to identify if an online student's learning preference impacts how the student responds to literature. Many college freshmen experience challenges as they attempt to interpret literature and then carry that interpretation into their class assignments, such as class discussions, tests and quizzes, and analytical essays (Sanoff 2006). Furthermore, the adult online learner has likely taken a break from the academic setting, making his or her composition and study skills a bit out of use (Nance, 2007; O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). Online students face additional obstacles of distance and discontent with the instructor since they do not engage in face-to-face lectures; however, successful online students are generally self-motivated and self-directing (Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). By seeking a relationship between the online student's learning style and response to literature, the student can use this knowledge of a link to engage in meta-cognition and "learning to learn."

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this relationship study was to determine if learning styles correlate with response to literature for online college freshmen enrolled in a "Composition and Literature"

course at a four-year university. Determining this relationship will help instructors guide students in exploring their way of thinking and examining literature, which becomes important in the online classroom since more independence is required of non-residential students. Furthermore, the various approaches to literature are not taught at length or identified in the "Composition and Literature" course, but people respond to and approach literature in various ways, often without realizing it. Noting how students approach literature can help instructors then formulate ways to help the students deepen their understanding through metacognition. Being meta-cognitively aware, or understanding how one thinks, will help students develop steps to create more in-depth analyses and broaden critical thinking skills. In this way, instructors can help students understand the connection between their own learning preferences (such as Active versus Reflective, Sensing versus Intuitive, Visual versus Verbal, and Sequential versus Global as defined by *Felder's Index of Learning Styles*) and response to literature (such as Insight, Empathy, Imagery Vividness, Leisure Escape, Concern with Author, Story-Driven Reading, or Rejecting Literary Values as defined by Miall and Kuiken's *Literary Response Questionnaire*) to then help with further analysis and critical thinking skills that can be applied both to later assignments concerning literature and also other courses that require critical thinking.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is two-fold: it interrogates the value of metacognition for online students while it also investigates the instructor's ability to help the students based on more knowledge about the students' learning preferences. The success of an online student in academia hinges on the ability to become self-directed and self-driven. Online students who exhibit metacognition seem to excel in the online classroom (Schmidt & Ford, 2003). Additionally, the online instructor should aim to develop community within the online classroom

and offer guidance on helping students support themselves (Abel, 2005).

At the college level, professors aim to expand skills that students have developed in high school, yet students do not always enter the college prepared to complete work at such a high academic standard. These deficiences have been noted particularly in reading and math (Bettinger et al., 2005). Eckert (2008) agreed that students are often not taught how to interpret:

> Too often, secondary school teachers and college professors expect students to effectively use advanced reading strategies and interpretive approaches, requiring students to 'read' with an understanding that this means critically engaging with textual material and assuming an interpretive stance, without explicitly teaching them how to do so. (p. 111)

Here, Eckert (2008) is pointing out the difference between criticism and reading comprehension. Online students especially are in danger of falling out of place due to a disconnect from the residential campus and a lack of face-to-face support (Ceballos, 2009; Furst-Bowe, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). In some ways, online students must learn to take care of themselves in some aspects; part of that can be developing meta-cognitive skills and understanding how they learn (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Schmidt & Ford, 2003).

It is clear that meta-cognition is beneficial for students so that they can better address their challenges in class by understanding how they think. If a student knows his or her tendencies in thinking, strengths, and weaknesses, then learning challenges can be overcome through developing strategies for completing assignments. Many college freshmen have trouble understanding how to think. Their brains have certainly thought throughout their lives, but students must learn how to process information and transcribe these thoughts in a clear, logical manner. By meta-cognitively understanding how they analyze through their learning preferences, applying critical thinking skills can become easier. These analytical skills will then

be passed onto other courses and practical life skills.

It is just as important for instructors to know their students' learning preferences as it is for the student to recognize his or her own. Becoming aware of a student's learning preferences and recognizing the connection between learning preferences and literary response, instructors can help guide students through the process of learning to analyze and interpret literature. These students can also be pushed by the instructor to grow in analytical and critical thinking skills.

Research Questions

RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between Learning Styles and Response to Literature as measured by the *Felder ILS* and *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship between an online student's gender and Response to Literature as measured by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

Null Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that students' learning preferences will impact how they interpret or analyze literature. Each student trends toward one or more of the responses to literature based on his or her own perspective, not necessarily what he or she considers to be the "best way" to analyze. Simply put, they do not consciously decide how they will analyze the text based on theories of analysis, but do so the only way they can. Separate learning preferences result in the different methods of analysis.

$H_0$1: There is no significant relationship between student learning style as shown by *Felder's Index of Learning Style* and his or her approach to literature as shown by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

$H_0$2: There is no significant relationship between gender and approach to literature as shown by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

Identification of Variables

The independent variable was students with differing learning preferences. This was measured using Felder's *Index of Learning Styles Questionnaire*. Two sets of students were contacted and invited to participate. Students were e-mailed the questionnaire during week six of an eight-week course and then during week one of an eight-week course. Students filled out the *Felder's ILS* survey through Qualtrics to establish the students' learning preferences. This tool has been tested for validity, reliability, and objectivity. It was used to place students into categories based on their learning preferences. The dependent variable was the students' approaches to literature. This was determined by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*, which is a survey utilizing the Likert scale that makes various responses to literature, also through Qualtrics.

Definitions

Learning style: Characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to their learning environment.

Response to literature: The manner or attitude in which a student approaches literature.

Formalism: A school of literary theory that emphasizes the "form" of literature, or the ways in which meaning is arrived at through literary elements. Formalists may examine how rhyme, meter, personification, theme, and other literary elements are used by the author to dictate meaning.

New Criticism: A school of literary theory that emphasizes a "close reading" of the text. The text alone is support for the literary critic's argument. The New Critic may claim how certain word choices have different implications for meaning about the text.

Reader Response: A school of literary theory that emphasizes how the reader reacts to the text in order to derive meaning. Those who conduct Reader Response respond to the emotions of the text, how it makes them feel, and may bring their own experiences to the analysis. The author of the text itself holds no more weight in arguments concerning meaning than any other reader because the author is also simply a reader.

Text: This term refers to any piece writing. For the purposes of this study, the students will be enrolled in "Composition and Literature" in which they will be reading short stories, poetry, and drama. Each of these is a separate genre of literature and each is considered to be a text.

Metacognition: Observing and adjusting one's thought process. This can be achieved through self-exportation, reflection, and self-regulation. This term refers to a person's awareness or understanding of how they think.

Learning to learn: The process of developing new ways to think by examining one's thought process.

Research Summary

This quantitative study utilized a relationship design to determine if a link exists between online students' learning styles and their responses to literature. This was done by examining students enrolled in "Composition and Literature" at a private, four-year university in the southeast of the United States. Students were invited to participate in the study through an e-mail, which provided a brief overview of the purpose of the study. Students were provided with a link to three questionnaires: a demographic survey, a learning styles instrument (*Felder's ILS*) to assess their learning style, and the *Literary Response Questionnaire* (*LRQ*) to identify how they respond to literature.

This study utilized a correlation research design since the relationship between learning style and preferred form of literary theory was examined. The unit of analysis was individual students with separate learning preferences. Prior to selecting the sample, it was impossible to know what the students' learning preferences were. However, by selecting a large sample of 538 students in "Composition and Literature," a diverse group of learning preferences were represented by the students. Research has demonstrated that there is no particular, dominant learning style that represents online students—instead, online students have various learning styles (Brown-Syed, Adkins, & Tsai 2008). By exploring the relationship between students' learning preferences and how they respond to literature, both students and instructors can find new ways to make literature accessible.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature can be difficult to understand and analyze; however, the study of literature stands as an essential part of a college freshmen's journey to becoming a well-rounded individual with critical thinking skills. Facing such challenges, the online learner enters the "Composition and Literature" classroom lacking as clear of a guide as the residential student—this online student must adapt by becoming self-sufficient, otherwise he or she will likely not last (Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008; Sciuto, 2002). Researchers note that online instructors should facilitate community and guide the online students (Abel, 2005; Snyder, 2009). Additionally, a student's experience greatly impacts how that student learns—and experience can be considered to be the beginning of learning. Just as these researchers focus on the student, Louise Rosenblatt (a *Reader Response* critic) focused on the reader's exchange with the text to determine meaning of a text instead of seeking meaning from the author, reader, or text alone (Rosenblatt, 1978). As instructors and curriculum developers aim to make literature more accessible to online students, the learning style and then how the student responds to literature could be useful in the aim of helping online students practice metacognition and "learn to learn" (Cheren, 2002; Huang, 2002; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; Mathews, 1999).

Readers and critics have analyzed literature through various ideological views since authors wrote the first words. Philosophers and literary critics have endlessly debated how literature reveals truth—or whether or not truth even exists—yet the focus of these debates has been placed on the authors, the idea of readers, literature itself as a subject, not individuals with learning preferences. In the "Composition and Literature" classroom, students engage with literature not just as readers of a text, but as learners with academic motivations and intentions to analyze the literature to complete coursework—whether that coursework is a test, essay, or class

discussion. Students in the online classroom find additional obstacles to overcome as readers since they can sometimes feel left to themselves to interpret both the assigned literature in the class and also the instructions of class assignments. That is, sometimes instructions can be unclear, and without a residential instructor to guide students through the process of understanding expectations, online students must develop autonomy. This study helps to bridge that gap between student and instructor while also taking steps to help students help themselves by understanding how they learn and also how they respond to literature. By investigating if students' learning preferences influence how they approach literature, a more personalized curriculum can be developed and online students can learn how to guide themselves through the process of literary interpretation and response.

Online Learners

The delivery of information through the use of the internet has revolutionized communication by making material accessible and available to new audiences. The internet allows business men and women to work with others across the world. Companies find new ways to advertise products to and connect with new customers. The delivery of education is no different. In electronic learning, the inter-based delivery is preferred and accepted as the method chosen above others (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). However, despite the growth of online education, theoretical research "ha[s] made only modest inroads in understanding how the technology-based delivery of instructional programs interacts with learning outcomes" (Salas, Kosarzycki, Burke, Fiore, & Stone, 2002, p.136). Because of the rapid growth in online learning and this persistent gap in research, it is important to explore how the needs of online learners can be met while keeping in mind learning outcomes that the curriculum sets out to achieve.

Development of Online Education

Online education holds its roots in correspondence courses. References to correspondence courses can be found in Europe as early as the 1720s (Valentine, 2002). In many cases, correspondence courses were utilized by students that could not gain access to the physical university; these students were separated geographically from their education and so completed coursework by correspondence instead of attending the physical classroom. Similarly, some online students choose the distance learning (or online) method due to inaccessibility of a college or university: sometimes students are simply too far from a school to commute to classes. Pettazzoni (2008) confirmed that online learners sometimes live in rural areas, making physical access to a university difficult at best.

As online education began to take root and grow, the first group of adult learners was military personnel (Hills, 2010). These military personnel needed course offerings that were more flexible due to their work obligations and possibility of deployment when they would not be able to attend a physical classroom at a university site; fortunately, postsecondary institutions developed classes that met online, in some instances including writing entire programs that could be delivered online (Hills, 2010). As these online programs grew in popularity among military personnel, other learners who previously could not attend class due to personal reasons found that they too could gain an education. Sciuto (2002) explained that some online learners are unable to attend a traditional, face-to-face college course due to a variety of limitations, including "illness, disability, incarceration, employment, or military service"—all of these limitations would interrupt a student's ability to commute to a college campus (p. 111). On the other hand, some online learners choose not to commute due to the extra travel time interrupting their family routine as well as social activities (Elko, 2002; Furst-Bowe, 2002). In a similar vein,

Sciuto (2002) cited physical limitations, job responsibilities, personal commitments, family obligations (such as being a single parent of a small child or being the care-taker of another family member), or physical location as reasons as to why online learners chose their method of education as online as opposed to attending residentially. While these learners might not endure the complications of military personnel, such as being deployed in other countries or possibly re-locating frequently, the student's complicated family life and busy work schedule at times do not allow for the student to attend classes during a typical school schedule.

The Backgrounds of Online Learners

When one thinks of those most likely to engage and utilize new technology, the image of a young adult or adolescent might come to mind. Certainly, many young adults have grown up surrounded by technology, computers, video games, and electronics. Some researchers might assume that these young adults would be the first to utilize online education due to young adults feeling so accustomed to and comfortable with technology; however, these researchers would instead find the opposite: online learners are more often older, non-traditional learners who have little past experience working with technology (Rodriguez, Ooms, & Montañez, 2008).

While there is no one single profile for the online learner, there are some trends that have been noted in research. The average, typical online student holds a full-time job, is married, and is a non-residential student (Nance, 2007; O'Malley & McCraw, 1999). Those online learners who are unemployed often seek a degree with the goal to find a job (Yadegarpour, 2006). Having varied life experiences, online learners are often described as adult learners; they are self-directed and highly motivated (Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). According to Sciuto (2002), these learners are able to work well independently and wisely manage their time. Quite simply, online learners typically bring a wealth of diverse life experiences to the classroom; they

are motivated by a goal (often career-related) and have the motivation to get them there. However, even with these skills and determination, online learns still need the help of a professor to get them there as they tackle obstacles that they might not have anticipated.

Adult Learners

Much of early educational psychology focused on the child as a learner, but gave little attention to the characteristics of an adult learner. As the main focus of early education, children require more assistance, guidance, and learning through discovery. Charles A. Wedemeyer believed that "[s]tudents should be taught the values and skills required to become independent learners, so that they could pursue lifelong learning at any point in their lives" (as cited in Moore, 2011, p. 38). In 1978, Malcolm Knowles sought to explore the adult learner in his text *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species.* Here, Knowles developed a new term to describe how adults learn. Instead of focusing on pedagogy, Knowles coined the term Andragogy, which comes from the Greek word meaning "adult-learning." Andragogy centers on five assumptions concerning how adult learners are different from child learners (p. 24).

1. Self-concept: As a person matures his self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.
2. Experience: As a person matures, he accumulates a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.
3. Readiness to learn: As a person matures, his readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of his social roles.
4. Orientation to learning: As a person matures, his time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application, and accordingly his orientation toward learning shifts from one of subject-centeredness to one of

problem-centeredness.

5. Motivation to learn: As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal. (Knowles, 1978, p. 12)

Through these assumptions, Knowles explains that an adult learner's experience and self-motivation play a critical role in the adult learner's education, which separates early and adult education.

Needs

Beyond coming from different backgrounds, successful online learners generally need to develop more self-sufficient skills. Due to the online format, those students enrolled in online courses have different needs than residential students. Multiple studies affirm the idea that success in the online classroom can be achieved by students that are highly motivated and self-directed (Ceballos, 2009; Furst-Bowe, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). Successful online students are those who motivate themselves, which makes sense since the online environment can become more detached than a residential program. Online learners do not have a physical classroom to attend filled with classmates on a similar journey; their instructor (while hopefully encouraging and involved electronically and perhaps by phone) may seem less real or human since nearly all of the interaction is through the computer. The disengaged online student is less likely to be checking his or her e-mail daily for a prompt from the instructor to participate in class. As a result, online learners must develop autonomy; one way to encourage this is to help students learn how they learn through meta-cognition.

Faculty members in a good online program will recognize this challenge and take steps to establish a community to meet the needs of online learners (Snyder, 2009). Online instructors need to reach out to their students, realizing that there is indeed a person beyond the computer

screen. Abel (2005) writes that strong communication and commitment to quality education through the use of reliable technology are essential in the online classroom. Michael G. Moore (2011) explains in his Transactional Distance Theory that

> the learner's behavior is based on his or her need for dialogue while the instructor strives to maintain a certain rate of structure to ensure that learning objectives are achieved; thus, the dynamic of interaction between the learner and the instructor determines the level of transactional distance at each point in time. (p. 59)

Faculty members should work to support students while also helping students learn how to direct themselves.

"Learning to Learn" and Metacognition

As adults enter the classroom after taking a break from education, they must grow to meet the new challenges of pursuing an education. These learners might be interacting with new technology for the first time. Also, they could likely be revisiting study skills that they had not used in many years, such as composing academic writing, reading in order to retain information for a test, thinking critically, and so on.

For these adult learners, they must learn to think in new ways and learn how to learn. This process has been referred to as "learning to learn." Brookfield (1995) explained that learning to learn is not isolated in the academic classroom itself, but instead research on practical intelligence and cognition is required in everyday situations and interactions. As a result, adult learners bring previously conceived learning processes that can be built upon and expanded; however, at the same time, some of these processes are the opposite of what is helpful in the classroom, so adult learners may require more assistance in learning how to learn in different ways (Cheren, 2002; Huang, 2002; Knowles et al., 1998; Mathews, 1999). If a student is

learning a new way to learn or critically think, this adult learner may need to take a step back and examine his or her current way of thinking with the assistance of an instructor so that he or she can then learn to think in a new way.

Knowles et al. (1998) support the idea of acknowledging one's thought process, dissecting that process, and attempting to change it. For Knowles et al. (1998), this process of "learning to learn" provides a new way to approach a topic. This process is essential in the English Literature classroom. Sometimes students find themselves reading a piece of literature that they have read earlier in life—or perhaps in high school—but new, more advanced demands of analysis in the college classroom require students to break down and explore the literature in new ways. If the student uses the same approach, that student may not arrive at an in-depth analysis, but instead merely reiterate the surface-level plot summary of the literature. Moran (1991) stated that adults need to purposefully seek out new and different ways of problem solving as opposed to searching for the singular, correct answer. In the literature classroom, students can arrive at many meanings and develop many responses to a text—there is not just one answer. Authors purposefully place multiple meanings in literature with depth, and so to only seek one, direct answer would be limiting the literature.

Through metacognition, students are able to think about how they are thinking. Metacognition is the act of observing and adjusting one's cognitive process (Brown et al., 1983; Flavell, 1979). This can be achieved through self-exportation, reflection, and self-regulation. Such a self-awareness can be helpful in helping a learner to develop problem solving skills and develop a deeper understanding of a subject (Lin & Lehman, 2001). Individuals are more involved in their learning process by noting their progress, recognizing a problem in the thinking process, and adjusting their learning strategies to help fix the issue and re-focus (Brown et al.,

1983). Learners are able to reflect in order to determine how they can work with more efficiency and clarity; they can achieve this by adjusting their focus, prioritizing in the interest of time, and taking a step back to re-examine the subject (Schmidt & Ford, 2003).

For the online learner, metacognition proves to be an even more important skill to help ensure success. Schmidt and Ford (2003) explain that within a Web-based training context, "learners who engaged in greater metacognitive activity demonstrated increased declarative knowledge, superior training performance, greater self-efficacy, higher levels of mastery goal orientation, and superior training performance" (Schmidt & Ford, 2003, p. 421). The lessons, curriculum, and coursework are presented to online students electronically and in the form of books, but if a student needs further help understanding a concept or an assignment, that student can often feel alone. Certainly, the instructor should be available to answer any questions and online tutoring services can be made available by some universities, but the online student generally works alone for the most part to learn in the course.

Learning Styles

Terry Eagleton (1996), a renowned literary critic, wrote that "we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns" (p. 10). Here, Eagleton explains that readers bring their own experiences to a text to inform their interpretation. This could extend to a student's learning style in the academic setting. By exploring the background of a student through the lens of his or her learning style, researchers may be able to understand a relationship with how that student approaches literature.

Development of Learning Styles

A recognition of people's various and fundamental differences in personality can be traced back to ancient time. Around 400 B.C., Hippocrates was noted as the first to attempt to

categorize the different personality types and to observe them. Thousands of years later, psychologists continued to study people's behavior in the twentieth century. Psychologists such as Ivan Pavlov, John Watson, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and then Carl Jung in 1920 focused on human behavior. Carl Jung, though, believed that people are motivated by innate differences—or personalities. Melear (1989) broke down Jungian theory to say that people consistently act differently based on how they process information, make decisions, form attitudes, and assimilate information. Jung believed that people can be classified into groups based on their patterns of behavior. Jung identified four personality dimensions to be placed on two scales: Introvert and Extrovert on the z-scale with Thinking and Feeling on the x-scale. With a two-dimensional scale, Jung aimed to map an individual's personality by noting the degree to which the individual is out-going or shy as well as his or her tendency to act on feelings or thinking (Chapman, 2006). However, Jung did not believe that an individual could be solely introverted or completely extroverted—instead, people have dynamic tendencies. As Jung mapped out personality types, he did not create an instrument to measure personality types. It was his ideas, though, on which many personality and learning style instruments are based. Carl Jung (1924) asserted that individuals may both think and learn differently than one another based not on outside influences, but instead on their personal make-up. Similarly, Piaget (1977) noted that a balance between assimilation and accommodation must be met to establish a stable equilibrium. Thus, the theory of learning styles began with Jungian model instruments (Schueler & Schueler, 2001).

Background and Experience in Adult Learners

A student's background and experience have been identified as the cornerstone of the adult learner's learning process. The way that a student processes information can be considered

a learning style. Wooldridge (1995) defined learning styles as "characteristic cognitive, affective, and physiological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with and respond to their learning environment" (p. 50). Seeing this as important, various researchers sought to observe and measure learning styles in hopes of providing insight into the mind of the learner. Mezirow, Freire, Kolb and Gregorc stressed in the early 1980s that learning is centered on how people process experience—specifically, critical reflection of experience (Banyard & Hayes, 1994, pp. 303-4). Because adult learners bring additional life experiences to the classroom and seem to learn differently than early learners based on these experiences, it becomes essential to evaluate adult learner's learning styles. Additionally, in 1996, Rogers stated that the cycle of learning starts with experience, is continued with reflection, and develops into action, a concrete experience for reflection (p. 110). In the case of the English Literature classroom, the learner would bring his or her life experiences to the text, experience an interaction with the text, and then develop a reflection based on an intersection of his or her life experiences and experience interacting with the text. Finally, the learner would perform some action (whether that is taking a test, participating in a discussion board forum, or writing a paper) as a product of his or her experience.

Felder's Index of Learning Styles

Felder and Soloman developed a learning style model in 1993 to explore multiple dimensions of a learner. These dichotomous learning styles dimensions are places on a continuum instead of specifically labeling a learner as one or the other. Like a Likert scale, the instrument measures where a learner stands on a scale (strong, moderate, or mild) in each category while also providing the flexibility for the learner to change over time or between subjects (Felder, 1993). Additionally, Felder and Soloman (1993) explained that everyone varies

on the scale depending on the situation. They noted that a learner's learning style profile can help point out possible strengths in a learner as well as weak habits that have the potential of disrupting the learning process. Felder and Soloman claimed that the Index of Learning Styles profile, while not 100% accurate all of the time, has grown to be "one of the standard methods" in helping to establish whether or not the learner is suitable for a subject, discipline, or profession; however, they also warn that the instrument should not be manipulated in order to encourage or discourage a learner from a particular career path (1993). At the same time, though, the ILS profile can be a useful tool in pointing out a learner's style so that the instructor can match that style in teaching method to avoid learners becoming bored in class (Felder & Soloman, 1993). Utilizing this instrument in the online classroom could be particularly useful to help keep students engaged and also guide them in understanding how they think.

Application of Felder's ILS Research

Kemp, Morrison, and Ross (1998) explained that instructor understanding of a student's learning preferences can be helpful in maximizing student learning. Considering a student's background and understanding his or her learning preferences can signal to an instructor the ways that a student will learn best. Because of this, the instructor may find connections between learning preferences and literary responses that will help a student improve in analysis and critical thinking skills. Also, knowing a student's learning style can help the instructor identify other forms of literary response that will be beneficial for the student to study. Understanding learning preferences and metacognition can also benefit the student. Slavin (2009) noted that students who consider metacognition may be able to progress in their learning more easily. While some learning styles instruments have received criticism for a lack of reliability, such as Kolb's Learning Styles, Felder's ILS has been noted to be more consistent and have applicable

predictive value (Papp, 2001).

In 2002, Doherty and Maddux conducted a study of 150 students enrolled in online courses at four community colleges in Nevada. Doherty and Maddux utilized Felder's ILS to note trends among these students in the online environment. Reflective learners were more likely to choose online courses than active learners. Additionally, these students preferred sequential learning style over global learning style. However, Doherty and Maddux found no significant relationship between learning styles and perception of effectiveness of the instructional methods. This is to say that learning styles did not impact how well the students received the curriculum. They did note, though, that sequential learners were more likely to finish the course than global learners, indicating that steps to interest global learners might be helpful.

Sabry and Baldwin (2003) used Felder's ILS to explore global and sequential learning styles with students majoring in information systems at a university in the United Kingdom. Two-hundred and thirty students indicated which of three types of online interactions they preferred: Learner-Information (navigating through websites); Learner-Tutor (asking their instructor questions); or Learner-Learner (participating in asynchronous discussions). Those global learners held a stronger preference for Learner-Information and Learner-Learner interactions.

Christopher Brown-Syed, Denice Adkins, and Hui-Hsien Tsai (2005) utilized Felder and Solomans's Index of Learning Styles in a study focusing on graduate-level Library and Information Science students. Coming from various backgrounds, Library and Information Science students have developed college study skills, but have done so at differing levels and with separate educational experiences. Students from both residential and web-based classrooms

responded to the survey with 50 being from face-to-face classes and 44 students being in online classes. The results showed that there was no significant difference between students' learning styles in the online course versus the residential course.

Thomas Berry and Amber Settle (2011) explored the different learning styles of finance students and faculty members with the Index of Learning Styles instrument. In their sample, Berry and Settle had 59 students enrolled in an honors finance course, 121 students in an introductory finance course, and 14 finance faculty members. They found that both the introductory and honors finance students showed to be Active, Sensory, Visual, and Sequential whereas the faculty were Reflective, Intuitive, Visual, and Global. The only similarity between the students and faculty members was the Visual aspect; however, Berry and Settle noted that the faculty members were not as strongly Visual as the students. Berry and Settle worried that the faculty members might be presenting material in a way that they prefer to learn, yet these methods might not reach the students in the clearest manner due to nearly opposite Index of Learning Styles scores.

These studies demonstrate the value of Felder's ILS in the academic setting and affirm the validity and reliability of the instrument. Felder's ILS has been utilized for numerous studies regarding students at various levels to develop profiles of students and note relationships. The possible link between student learning styles and response to literature, though, has not been explored. As curriculum developers and instructors hope to meet the needs of online students, the way a student responds to literature (and how learning styles impact this) should be a subject of interest.

Reader Response

In the online learning environment, a diverse group of students interact with shared texts

to produce various interpretations. The question of how to correctly approach and interpret literature to arrive at meaning is not a problem unique to the online classroom or even in education; instead, literary critics have argued for hundreds of years—or thousands, perhaps, as far back as Aristotle's *Poetics* circa 335 B.C.—about how to properly read literature and who or what source holds authority concerning meaning. Louise Rosenblatt (1978), a Reader Response critic, observed reading as an event and claimed that the transaction of the reader and the text produces meaning. By determining if students' learning styles inform their responses to literature, educators can help students understand sometimes difficult-to-understand texts.

Rising Against New Criticism

New Criticism is a form of literary theory that emphasizes a "close reading" of the text. T. S. Eliot (1992), a re-knowned Modernist poet and New Criticism literary theorist, explained that "[h]onest criticism and sensitive appreciation" focuses not on the author, but on the text. Because of this, the text alone is support for the New Critic's argument. The New Critic may claim how certain word choices have different implications for meaning about the text. Rejecting the focus on solely historical approaches of the time, New Criticism pushed aside the idea that the author's background and the historical context of a text were vital in interpretation (Evans, 1992).

New Critics emphasized that the text should be the object of study in an effort to move away from a focus on external information. New Critics explore poems as an artificial or a verbal icon that should be explored with a scientific approach so that the reader avoids the "affective fallacy'—or, a misreading when the reader misinterprets a text based on his or her emotional response—and the "intentional fallacy"—or, a misreading when the reader confuses the meaning of the text based on what he or she thinks the author intended (Wismatt &

Beardsley, 1954). In a close reading, the reader pays close attention to the structure of the text and utilizes knowledge of literary elements and vocabulary.

Reader Response: Holland and Fish

Reacting against New Criticism, Reader Response criticism emphasizes how the reader reacts to the text in order to derive meaning. Those who conduct Reader Response respond to the emotions of the text, how it makes them feel, and may bring their own experiences to the analysis. The author of the text itself holds no more weight in arguments concerning meaning than any other reader because the author is also simply another reader. Among the various Reader Response critics, Norman Holland, Stanley Fish, and Louise Rosenblatt each hold a different view of the reader, the act of reading, and the text.

Norman Holland is known for his transactive theory. In this theory, literature is re-created by its readers in a manner similar to how "transactional psychologists have shown we create colors, shapes, and directions of the world we perceive" (Holland, 1968, p. 248). Holland (1968) explored the connection between New Criticism and Freudian psychology in *The Dynamics of Literary Response*. Holland explained this connection between perceptions of the world and literature:

> As the woman/man is, so she/he reads. A literary transaction has the same dialectical structure as our other acts of perception: we perceive the text, as we perceive all reality, through a pre-existing schema; each of us will find in the literary work the kind of thing we characteristically wish or fear the most. (p. 817)

To Holland, the act of reading a text is almost an extension of the reader's psyche. Holland emphasized Freud's principles because he believed that a reader interacts with literature in the same manner that the reader understands his or her own psychological experiences.

Perhaps the most well-known American Reader Response Critic, Stanley Fish served as the Chair of the English Department at Duke University. There, he wrote about an interesting misunderstanding when a student asked, "Is there a text in this class?" While the student simply referred to a required book for the course, Fish explored just how much power stood behind that question. In Fish's reader-response class, he facilitates students as students make meanings instead of finding them. One scholar noted the complexity of finding meaning in a text from Fish's perspective:

> For Fish there is no such thing as an objective text because everything in a reading--its grammar, syntax, and semantic units--is an interpretation. What happens inside the student/reader is the questions which remains for Fish the most important. (Evans, 1992, p. 53)

In this way, examining what a student brings to literature holds just as much importance as what the author brought to the literature during the act of composition.

In Fish's (1980) "Literature in the Reader," he stated that meaning is developed as an event taking place between the reader and the text. The reader develops interpretation through the lens of his or her linguistic and cultural experiences. However, at the same time, interpretation is limited by the reader's education and personal taste. Since readers approach texts with various linguistic and cultural experiences and have different educational backgrounds and personal tastes, there can be multiple interpretations of a text instead of one correct answer. According to Fish (1980), interpretative communities hold responsibility of fashioning both literary meanings and moral values. Interpretative communities are groups of individuals with shared, common linguistic and cultural experiences. With similar backgrounds, the interpretative communities develop meaning based on their shared understandings. While exploring a

student's learning style in this study is different than identifying the influence of interpretative communities, perhaps Fish's ideas and concepts of an unconscious force informing a reader's interpretation can be useful in aiding instructors and students in the "Literature and Composition" course.

Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Unlike other Reader Response theorists, Louise Rosenblatt did not focus on the reader alone. Also, unlike New Critics, Rosenblatt did not focus on the text alone. Instead, Rosenblatt explored the transaction between the reader and the text: this intersection is where she believed meaning could be found. Rosenblatt borrowed the term "transactional" from Dewey and Bentley's work *Knowing and the Known* (1949). She explained her use of the term in saying, "Transaction, designates, then, an ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of the total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning one another" (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 17). This transaction, for Rosenblatt, demonstrates that the reader and the text have influence on one another in order to produce meaning.

To Rosenblatt, the reader is an active participant approaching a poem as an event. Rosenblatt (1978) saw the text as "a set or series of signs interpretable as linguistic symbols," while the poem is "the whole category of aesthetic transactions between readers and texts without implying the greater or lesser poeticity of any specific genre" (p. 12). The act of the reader attending the event (reading a poem), or what Rosenblatt (1978) calls the transaction, is an "ongoing process in which the elements or factors are, one might say, aspects of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (p. 17). In the transactional theory, arriving at meaning is a non-linear process in which the reader engages in both the literature and his or her personal life and experiences.

Literature as Experience

Literature and experience are intertwined, just as adult learners and their experiences are linked so closely. In literature, the author is presenting his or her ideas, which are based on his or her understanding and experience. Rosenblatt has explained that readers bring their experiences with them to the event of reading, and these experiences (in addition to the experience of reading) develop into interpretation. In the classroom, the English professor also brings his or her experience into the equation—the professor has had life experiences, experiences interacting with the text (possibly and hopefully multiple times), perhaps experience listening to lectures concerning the text, and also an experience evaluating students' performance on tests, discussion board forums, and papers concerning the text. Within this long, complicated process, people make imprints on the text just as the text makes imprints on them. At some intersection, all of these experiences can be evaluated and measured by exploring how a student's learning style impacts how the student responds to literature.

Inaccessibility of Literature for Undergraduates

Challenges Left by Authors

Wayne C. Booth (1983) pointed out that many literary greats, including Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, did not consider their readers' needs or reading comprehension skills when composing literature. As a result, readers must "learn to read" (Booth, 1983, p. 90) in the act of interpreting. Woolf and Faulkner wrote during the British and American Modernist periods when authors were challenged by Ezra Pound to "make things new" in literature. In reaction to Pound, authors began utilizing methods that resulted in creating difficult-to-read texts that defied general rules of form and composition. Non-linear plots arose with stream of consciousness narration styles, which follow the thoughts of the character, often appearing as

muddled and confusing as people's minds. Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* begins with a stream of consciousness narrative from the perspective of an individual with an intellectual disability. The narration then shifts to another character without warning. Students will undoubtedly have difficulties understanding such a piece of literature; however, Faulkner would not have compromised his style of writing for the sake of accessibility. Instead, he would have argued that the reader should rise to the challenges presented by his text as opposed to his work stepping down to meet the reader. Meaning in literature can be difficult to arrive at—it is intentionally left as a challenge or a puzzle at times. Understanding how a reader responds to literature, though, helps to train students about how to read and analyze.

These challenges and puzzles left by authors are often hard—and sometimes impossible—to solve without the proper terms, tools, and analytical approaches provided by schools of literary theory. Graff (2000) explained that he despised literature due to the confusion he experienced surrounding the texts. They were inaccessible, irrelevant, and boring to him. However, after being taught literary theory, analyzing literature became more enticing, enjoyable, and accessible. Graff's experience is not wholly unique. Instead, Graff was provided with the ability to interpret and criticize. Developing a curriculum emphasizing various approaches to literature brings a whole new level of understanding for literature as students begin thinking like writers and literary critics.

Challenges Experienced by Students

College students in the literature classroom experience challenges when attempting to analyze literature because many have not been well-equipped to meet the demands of higher education. Sanoff (2006) found that 41% of college professors believed that students are not well-prepared for the demands of college whereas 15% of those preparing the students

(secondary teachers) believed students to be unprepared. This finding indicates that there could be a gap in perceptions of college expectations. As a result, students may experience set-backs in the college classroom that they were not prepared for, which aligns with the aforementioned demand of students to merely develop reading comprehension skills in high school followed by the assumption in "English 101" that students have already developed critical thinking and analytical skills. Many professors of freshmen-level courses complain that their first duty in the classroom is to teach these newly-termed college students how to think.

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) noted that inexperienced writers are overwhelmed by the simple process of transcribing their essays, causing the teacher's request for students to develop original analysis to be outlandish. This article was written twenty-seven years ago, but it still echoes true. Inexperienced writers are still overwhelmed with the process of composing sentences while keeping in mind correct formatting, grammar, structure, and diction to the point that the criticism or analysis of literature becomes difficult at best. Bereiter and Scardamlia (1987) stated that this causes inexperienced writers to resort to fact reporting, which is not acceptable content for college-level essays. In higher education, students should be learning how to think critically and then support those analytic claims with evidence in a well-written essay. Because of this challenge, college students will benefit greatly from literary theory so that they are able to develop the vocabulary to go along with the demands for analysis that are required of the college-level course.

Eckert (2008) agreed that students are often not taught how to interpret, stating,

> Too often, secondary school teachers and college professors expect students to effectively use advanced reading strategies and interpretive approaches, requiring students to 'read' with an understanding that this means critically engaging with textual material and

assuming an interpretive stance, without explicitly teaching them how to do so. (p. 111)

Here, Eckert (2008) is pointing out the difference between analysis and reading comprehension. Students need to explore how they interact with texts to produce strong textual analysis.

Lilla (1998) reinforced the notion that literary texts can indeed be difficult to understand; however, he also claimed that study aids, such as CliffsNotes, should be permissible. Aids such as CliffsNotes and SparkNotes often provide the student with surface-level plot analysis followed by key characters, symbols, and other literary devices. Many professors, though, see this as a form of cheating since it provides a "short cut" to an answer (Lilla, 1998). In essence, students are able to arrive at a summary of the plot with some level of analysis that can be seen as an application of the Formalist school of literary theory. This does not demonstrate understanding or true application of literary theory, and Lilla (1998) recognized that oftentimes students refer to short cut aids such as these out of confusion—and sometimes laziness. Here the problem arises because the student is not engaging with the text or learning how to interact with the literature. If students were made aware of how they respond to literature as part of the curriculum alongside the literature itself, aids such as CliffsNotes, SparkNotes, and 123helpme.com would not be necessary for the confused student—only the lazy one—because confusion could greatly be reduced.

Response to Literature Scheme and Instrument Development

Over the years, researchers have demonstrated interest in exploring how students respond to literature. They attempt to define and categorize the ways in which students read literature and then produce a response based on their interaction with a text. The work of the following researchers greatly influenced the development of the *Literary Response Questionnaire* by Miall and Kuiken (1995), an instrument that this study utilized in determining a correlation between

student learning style and response to literature.

Purves and Rippere (1968) aimed to further develop Squire's (1964) categories of response since they found Squire's work to include categories that were too broad that also contained some overlap. Through this process, Purves and Rippere developed a scheme with the aim to analyze the content of written literary response. They developed the categories by describing the responses of readers from four different countries and based the categories on the relationship between writer and text, similar to Reader Response theory. These categories included engagement-involvement (describing/explaining how the work was experienced); perception (looking at the work as separate from reader); interpretation (connecting the work to own world); evaluation (judging the work); and a miscellaneous category for those who did not fit in the other categories. Purves and Rippere also identified 24 subcategories to continue to define the difference between the four main categories.

Odell and Cooper (1976) expanded the work of Purves and Rippere by elaborating the scheme in analyzing the content of responses of an eleventh grade student. Odell and Cooper's work focused on four categories with different levels within the category in hopes of "captur[ing] more information that would be lost by using only the four broad categories" (p. 206). The categorization scheme consisted of: personal statement (about the reader—an autobiographical digression, or about the work—expressing personal engagement with it); descriptive statements (narrational—retelling part of the work or aspects of the work—language, characters, setting, etc.); interpretive statement (whole or parts of work); and evaluative statements (evocativeness or construction or meaningfulness of work).

In 1961, Cooper and Michalak hoped to determine the most valid method of labeling the response style of a writer. They utilized Purves's framework of four main categories (a

Response Preference Measure) and essay analysis. The Response Preference Measure (RPM) created by Cooper and Michalak consisted of 20 questions based on Purves's four main response categories. The researchers asked students to identify the five questions on the RPM that they thought were the most important to ask about a story. In the process of gathering research, though, Cooper and Michalak noted that they had included more questions in the interpretation and perception categories than the others, which caused participants to choose these more frequently than the others, thus skewing the results. When analyzing the RPM responses that utilized Purves's scheme, the researchers determined "identifying the preferred mode by the statement with the highest percentage of responses gives a misleading view of a single responders true preference" (p. 166). They found analyzing the student essays to hold the most validity and to be more accurate when measuring an individual's response style since the essay's thesis could point out one or two main characterizations that could summarize a general approach to literature.

This correlation study utilized the *Literary Response Questionnaire* (LRQ), which was designed by David S. Miall and Don Kuiken (1995) with the aim to explore how a reader approaches a literary text based on predisposed attributes. Miall and Kuiken (1995) were informed by Purves's *Response Preference Questionnaire*, but also considered the limitations and issues with the instrument. The LRQ holds validity and reliability. The final version of the instrument was established through five studies in which university students participated. In the first four studies, the participants were enrolled in a psychology course while the participants for the fifth study also included advanced English students (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). Through these five studies, Miall and Kuiken (1995) asserted that these scales possess satisfactory internal consistency, retest reliability, and factorial validity.

The LRQ utilizes a Likert scale (1 indicating “not true at all” and 5 affirming “extremely true”), and consists of 68 questions concerning “how true” a statement is about the participant. From there, the LRQ organizes the reader’s response to literature into seven categories:

1. Insight (14 items): This factor reflects an approach to reading in which the literary text guides recognition of previously unrecognized qualities, usually in the reader, but also in the reader's world. Nine items refer to shifts in self-under-standing and 5 refer to changes in the reader's understanding of less personal matters.

2. Empathy (7 items): This factor indicates projective identification with fictional characters. Some items reflect the extended “presence” of these characters (e.g., in imagined dialogue), as though projective identification is regarded as a means to make the characters seem “real” to the reader.

3. Imagery Vividness (9 items): This factor expresses imaginary elaboration of a literary world that becomes vividly present not only visually, but also in feeling, sound, and smell.

4. Leisure Escape (11 items): This factor indicates an approach to reading that emphasizes reading for pleasure and as an enjoyable and absorbing departure from everyday responsibilities.

5. Concern with Author (10 items): This factor reflects interest in the author’s distinctive perspective, themes, and style, as well as the author’s biographical place in a literary or intellectual tradition.

6. Story-Driven Reading (8 items): This factor reflects an approach where the reader is focused on plot or story-line, with particular emphasis on interesting action and compelling conclusions.

7. Rejecting Literary Values (9 items): This factor represents the rejection of careful reading, of scholarly study, and of instructional presentation of literary texts. (Miall & Kuiken, 1995, pp. 41-42)

These seven categories explore how readers approach literature in a way that they are predisposed.

Importance of "Composition and Literature" Course

The "Composition and Literature" course is often part of a student's general education requirements. This course serves as a follow-up course after an "Introduction to Composition" course and stands as a bridge to a 200-level literature course that might be more narrowly focused, such as exploring British literature, American literature, African-American literature, Women's literature, or World literature. While the exact titles of the courses may vary, many colleges and universities follow this basic format with the intention of preparing students in the composition, analytical, and critical thinking skills with the goal of preparing students in an interdisciplinary manner for their major courses (Hood, 2002) and also providing a sense of writing ability and literacy to guide students in culture and life outside of the university in "larger cultural, historical, social, and political systems" (Brandt, 1995, p. 392).

Freshmen entering the university may not come equipped with the necessary writing and analytical skills in order to succeed in process of earning a degree. As a result, these students are required to take a series of composition courses in order to learn (or re-learn) how to write, develop arguments, research, and think critically. Some universities require students to take a placement reading and writing test to determine if they will need to enroll in a remedial reading or composition course. Such courses are sometimes titled "Basic Composition" or "Introduction to Reading." In remedial courses, students learn basic grammatical rules, work on developing

sentences, write paragraphs with cohesive ideas, and sometimes develop an essay. These courses aim to prepare students to enter the "Introduction to Composition" course (sometimes ENGL 101).

In "Introduction to Composition," students work on composing essays with clear structure and support for ideas. They should learn the main tenets of writing, such as how to write a clear thesis statement, develop topic sentences for paragraphs, and support ideas logically (Steinberg, 1995). This course might also introduce students to research by showing them how to use the library, identify scholarly sources, and utilize documentation styles, such as MLA, APA, and Chicago style. Some "Introduction to Composition" courses take a personal approach and help introduce students to writing by requiring them to write narrative and descriptive at first so that students write about their experiences. On the other hand, universities may choose to take a more detached and perhaps academic approach from the beginning with argumentative assignments in writing. While this course emphasizes clear, logical, and supported ideas in writing, the "Composition and Literature" course focuses on analyzing and arguing about literature.

The "Composition and Literature" course demands that students face two challenging tasks at once: think about literature beyond the surface-level meaning and write about the significance of the argument at the same time in a clear manner (Steinberg, 1995; Gill, 2000). Building on the skills developed in the "Introduction to Composition" course, the students must develop arguments concerning subjects that they are less attached to. For example, it might be easy to write an argumentative essay on an issue that is important to a student, but it grows more difficult to compose an analysis of a piece of literature that the student finds inaccessible. The curriculum in these courses, though, often aims to make literature more understandable by

exploring the literary elements, the text's place in history and culture, facts concerning the author and what might have influenced the author, and so on. Students must learn to think critically and make connections beyond what the author is saying on the surface. These analytical and critical thinking skills extend beyond the "Composition and Literature" classroom. If a student is able to apply such principles to literature, the student may then transfer these critical thinking skills to another subject. While writing essays in the "Composition and Literature" course, students engage in difficult texts, develop an argument, and support that argument while writing a well-composed essay with clear structure, organization, mechanics, and sometimes research.

Many universities also require a 200-level literature course. In this class, students take a narrower look at a certain category of literature. While the "Composition and Literature" course might explore fiction, poetry, and drama throughout the world, the 200-level literature course instead focuses more finely on literature of a country, genre, or group. Trends are noted throughout the literature, clear connections are made, and re-occurring themes and influences are recognized. Class discussions and reflections sometimes are also more of a focus so that students engage with one another concerning meaning. College freshmen have been charged with a difficult task that they might not be comfortable with as they learn to analyze literature. If this study can help students understand how they respond to literature naturally, they can then metacognitively take one step closer to analyzing literature.

Current Research

Little to no qualitative or quantitative research has been conducted on the subject of a student's learning style preference impacting how he or she responds to literature. As a result, there is very little precedent established concerning a research design. However, a few studies have been conducted in other subject areas that are similar enough to merit being considered.

Perhaps most relevant, Erik van Shooten and Ron Oostdam (2001) utilized the *Literary Response Questionnaire* to explore what predictors would signal how students responded to literature. In the 1995-1996 school year, a sample of students from grades seven through nine was gathered randomly from 116 schools. These participants varied in age from 13 to 15. About 30 to 50 minutes a week were dedicated to teaching literature with a focus on literary history, structural analysis, and students' personal experiences while reading fiction (p. 7). To gauge the students' cultural backgrounds, the students kept a five-week log of cultural and leisure activities, including visits to the theater, library, movies, museums, concerts as well as reading of comics, fiction, newspapers, magazines, and so on. Also, the students' vocabulary was measured with a 40-item vocabulary test. They explained how they measured the students' language, cultural background, and educational background:

> [the students'] gender, native tongue and country, type of student's education, number of weekly lessons in Dutch, number of weekly lessons in literary education, school size, availability of a school library, teacher's level of education, and teacher's specialization in either literature or linguistics were measured by a single questionnaire items. (van Shooten and Oostdam, 2001, p. 8)

In this study, van Shooten and Oostdam found that girls held higher scores of Leisure Escape, Insight, Empathy, Imagery Vividness, and a lower score of Rejecting Literary Value. As one might expect, those students with higher vocabulary scores also scored higher in Imagery Vividness, Leisure Escape, and Trance. The students in "higher types of education programs" (p. 19) scored higher on Leisure Escape, Story-Driven Reading, Empathy, Imagery Vividness, and Trance, yet there was no significant difference concerning Insight, Concern with Author, Rejecting Literary Values, or second-order factor Literary Interpretation. Also, those students

who read fiction more in their logs also scored higher on Leisure Escape, Insight, Empathy, Concern with Author, Imagery Vividness, Trance, and Literary Interpretation as well as lower on Rejecting Literary Values. Students that came from a "culturally more sophisticated home environment" (p. 19) held a lower response on Rejecting Literary Values and scored higher on all aspects of literary response.

Sahin (2009) analyzed the correlation between physics students' "expectations, attitudes, and epistemological beliefs about physics and physics learning" (p. 169) and their end-of-semester grades. Sahin (2009) noted this to be important because students who possess high epistemological knowledge, or the understanding and perception of how "knowledge is constructed and evaluated" (p. 169), perform better in the science classroom. However, after raw scores were analyzed, Sahin (2009) concluded that only effort proved to be an indicator of students' final grades.

Similarly, Choi, Lee, and Kang (2009) conducted a study with the aim to consider learning preferences in an online setting in a lecture-oriented anaesthesiology class. They gathered a sample of 70 students, 59 of which completed the learning preferences inventory and 45 completed a course satisfaction survey. The instrument they utilized was The Index of Learning preferences questionnaire (ILS), developed by Felder and Soloman. After comparing the learning preferences and course satisfaction survey, they determined that learning preferences did not affect student-satisfaction with the course. Choi, Lee, and Kang (2009) concluded, "It is more efficient to encourage students to adapt to different learning environments than to design adaptive systems in order to embrace diverse learning preferences" (p. 945).

These two studies would seem to go against the assertion that considering student learning preferences in connection with literary theory would positively affect student

performance since Sahin cited effort was the only indicator of a student's grade performance. However, Sahin's study revolved around students' perceptions about knowledge in the physics classroom, not necessarily accessibility to the terms and approaches to analyzing physics—or, in this case, literature. In the same vein, Choi, Lee, and Kang (2009) were examining a course that cites a specific skill in a dentistry school, also in the science field. In such a case, there are only a few possible approaches to administering anesthesia. On the other hand, literary theory is much more dynamic and many various interpretations of literature can be seen as valid with proper support from the text. Literary theory can be more personalized to a student's interests than the objectivity of a science course. These studies are significant because they established a process determining epistemological knowledge and learning preferences through utilizing an instrument at the beginning and end of the semester.

Conclusio**n**

This study aimed to determine a relationship between online students' learning styles and their response to literature in the "Composition and Literature" course. By establishing a connection between students' learning styles and their responses to literature, instructors can help students understand how they think, which can alleviate some anxiety when approaching literature and help them to stretch themselves in analyzing. Critical thinking skills are essential for all learners, but self-sufficiency and self-direction are both particularly important for the online learner. While instructors should be present in online courses to help guide students and facilitate learning as much as possible, online students must develop self-motivational skills and an understanding of "learning to learn" if they hope to complete their programs successfully. As a result, this study focuses on seeking to find a relationship between the student as both a learner and a reader. A strong focus on the reader is not only an idea founded in educational theory, but

also is grounded in Reader Response theory, a critical approach to literature. In fact, the need for considering the reader (or student) in the process of understanding and studying literature stands at the intersection of both of these educational and literary theories.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

As readers interact with a text, they bring their backgrounds and learning styles to the process. When students at the post-secondary level analyze a piece of literature, this process becomes even more complex and at times students lack the words to articulate what they are thinking. By helping students understand what approach, or response, might be more natural for and accessible to them, the students can analyze literature with more ease. The purpose of this study was to identify a relationship between student learning style utilizing *Felder's Index of Learning Styles* and their response to literature with the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

Design

As explained in Chapter One, this study sought to note the relationship between a student's learning style and response to literature. This was done by examining students in online sections of "Composition and Literature" at a four-year university. Learning styles were first assessed by having students complete *Felder's Index of Learning Styles* at the beginning of the semester. From there, the students also completed the *Literary Response Questionnaire* to identify how they respond to literature.

This study utilized a correlation research design since the relationship between learning style and preferred form of literary theory was examined. The unit of analysis was individual students with separate learning preferences. Prior to selecting the sample, it was impossible to know what the students' learning preferences were. However, by selecting a large sample of "Composition and Literature" students, a diverse group of learning preferences should be represented by the students.

The point of focus was if different learning styles in students correlate with certain

responses to literature.

Research Questions and Null Hypotheses

The research questions that were addressed are as follows:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between Learning Styles and Approach to Literature as measured by the *Felder ILS* and *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between gender and Approach to Literature as measured by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

$H_0$1: There is no significant relationship between student learning style as shown by *Felder's Index of Learning Style* and his or her approach to literature as shown by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

$H_0$2: There is no significant relationship between gender and approach to literature as shown by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

Participants

The population of this study was composed of students in the freshmen-level "Composition and Literature" course at a four-year, private, Christian university in the southeast of the United States. The university offers both residential and online courses and degrees. 114 students in "Composition and Literature" were examined to comprise the sample. When not enough students responded, the invitation to participate was extended to 424 other students. At this university, the average undergraduate age is 35 with more than 86% of students being non-traditional students. It is composed of 39% male and 61% female students. As for race, 53% reported white and 19% reported African American while 22% are not reported.

These demographics represent what comprises the online side of the university specifically, not the residential program through the university. Residential university students

more closely resemble the typical, traditional college student in that the average student enters college from high school. The majority of the students in the online "Composition and Literature" courses are enrolled in the online program; however, residential students do have the option of enrolling in a specifically online course as opposed to taking the residential course. While this is an option and residential students threaten to disrupt the demographics since the residential students hold separate demographics than online, usually only a few students will be in each section, causing the aforementioned demographics to be accurate concerning the "Composition and Literature" course.

Setting

The setting for the study will be at a four-year, private, Christian university in the southeast of the United States. This SACS-accredited university offers both residential and online courses; however, the online side of the university was specifically and purposefully selected in order to explore online students. Five hundred thirty-four students in "Composition and Literature" were invited to participate. Students enrolled in this course are seeking to fulfill a general education requirement and have demonstrated knowledge from or passed "Introduction to Composition." These courses utilize an eight-week sub-term and were delivered in the Summer 2014 semester.

Instrumentation

A demographic survey (see Appendix A) and two instruments were used to look for a relationship between student learning style and response to literature. These three questionnaires were sent to participants as a link in an e-mail using Qualtrics. The learning style instrument, *Felder's Index of Learning Styles*, places students on a scale in four categories. The response to literature instrument, *Literary Response Questionnaire*, places readers into four categories.

Felder's Index of Learning Styles was utilized to determine participants' learning preferences. This instrument places participants on a scale in four categories:

> ACTIVE v. REFLECTIVE LEARNERS: Active learners tend to retain and understand information best by doing something active with it—discussing or applying it or explaining it to others. Reflective learners prefer to think about it quietly first.
>
> SENSING v. INTUITIVE LEARNERS: Sensing learners tend to like learning facts; intuitive learners often prefer discovering possibilities and relationships.
>
> VISUAL v. VERBAL LEARNERS: Visual learners remember best what they see--pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations. Verbal learners get more out of words—written and spoken explanations. Everyone learns more when information is presented both visually and verbally.
>
> SEQUENTIAL v. GLOBAL LEARNERS: Sequential learners tend to gain understanding in linear steps, with each step following logically from the previous one. Global learners tend to learn in large jumps, absorbing material almost randomly without seeing connections, and then suddenly "getting it."

Felder's ILS holds well-established validity and reliability. Felder and Spurlin (2005) wrote that the "[t]est-retest correlation coefficients for all four scales of the instrument varied between 0.7 and 0.9 for an interval of four weeks between test administrations and between 0.5 and 0.8 for intervals of 7 months and 8 months" (p. 110).

Felder's ILS places participants on a continuum as opposed to placing them into one category or another. For example, a participant can score between 11 to 1 for Active or -1 to -11 for Reflective instead of being simply Active or Reflective. A continuum makes the scoring more personal. To describe the participants' placement on the continuum, Felder labels a score

of 1 to 3 as a mild preference, 5 to 7 as a moderate preference, and 9 to 11 as a strong preference.

Access to and use of *Felder's ILS* is free for individuals, educators, and researchers. However, businesses that plan to use it must contact North Carolina State University to purchase a license. In order to be sure that I was not stepping out of the research aspect of use and also as a courtesy, I contacted the Licensing Associate at NCSU through e-mail. The Licensing Associate assured me that my project remained within the confines of research and would not require me to purchase a license (see Appendix B).

The *Literary Response Questionnaire* was designed by David S. Miall and Don Kuiken with the aim to explore how a reader approaches a literary text based on predisposed attributes (1995). The LRQ was created with the intention of measuring readers with a "relatively well developed conception of literature" (p. 38), including students with at least an "upper high school background" (p. 38), making this instrument particularly useful for the "Composition and Literature" setting. Utilizing a Likert scale (1 indicating "not true at all" and 5 affirming "extremely true"), the LRQ consists of 68 questions concerning "how true" a statement is about the participant. From there, the LRQ organizes the reader's response to literature into seven categories:

1. Insight (14 items): This factor reflects an approach to reading in which the literary text guides recognition of previously unrecognized qualities, usually in the reader, but also in the reader's world. Nine items refer to shifts in self-understanding and 5 refer to changes in the reader's understanding of less personal matters.

2. Empathy (7 items): This factor indicates projective identification with fictional characters. Some items reflect the extended "presence" of these characters (e.g., in imagined dialogue), as though projective identification is regarded as a means to make

the characters seem "real" to the reader.

3. Imagery Vividness (9 items): This factor expresses imaginary elaboration of a literary world that becomes vividly present not only visually, but also in feeling, sound, and smell.

4. Leisure Escape (11 items): This factor indicates an approach to reading that emphasizes reading for pleasure and as an enjoyable and absorbing departure from everyday responsibilities.

5. Concern with Author (10 items): This factor reflects interest in the author's distinctive perspective, themes, and style, as well as the author's biographical place in a literary or intellectual tradition.

6. Story-Driven Reading (8 items): This factor reflects an approach where the reader is focused on plot or story-line, with particular emphasis on interesting action and compelling conclusions.

7. Rejecting Literary Values (9 items): This factor represents the rejection of careful reading, of scholarly study, and of instructional presentation of literary texts. (Miall & Kuiken, 1995, pp. 41-42)

These seven categories explore how readers approach literature in a way that they are predisposed.

The *LRQ* holds validity and reliability. The final version of the instrument was established through five studies in which university students participated. In the first four studies, the participants were enrolled in a psychology course while the participants for the fifth study also included advanced English students (Miall & Kuiken, 1995). Through these five studies, Miall and Kuiken (1995) asserted that these scales possesses satisfactory internal

consistency, retest reliability, and factorial validity. Each scale demonstrated satisfactory to excellent internal consistency as indicated by *alpha* coefficients ranging from .79 to .93 (Miall & Kuiken, 1995, p. 42). The retest reliability estimates ranged from .65 (for Story-Driven Reading) to .90 (for Leisure Escape) (Miall & Kuiken, 1995, p. 55).

Procedures

Prior to data collection, approval from the Institutional Review Board was sought in order to guarantee that participants were not being harmed. The issues that the Institutional Review Board protects participants from were not present within the research design and the participants had little work outside of their typical course assignments. The project did not examine a special population. The population consisted of college-level students enrolled in "Composition and Literature," indicating that they are not children, adolescents, specific ethnic groups, lower socio-economic status, or anyone who cannot give legal consent. Audio, video, digital, or image recordings were not included in data collection. This did not present any complications or the requirement of additional forms to be filled out with the Institutional Review Board. Participants were notified from the beginning of the course that the study will be taking place and were given the option to not participate. Their course grades would not be impacted negatively by opting out of the study. Additionally, their course grades would not be impacted positively by participating in the study—that is, they would not be bribed to participate with extra credit opportunities.

During the Summer 2014 semester, the students in the "Composition and Literature" course received an e-mail requesting that they participate in the study. After a brief explanation of the study was presented in the e-mail, the students were be able to click on a link through Qualtrics to fill out a demographic survey (see Appendix A), the *Felder's ILS*, and the *Literary*

Response Questionnaire. The demographics survey was used to determine the actual demographics of the participants. The results of the two instruments were compared to identify a relationship. At first, 114 students across five sections in the Summer B term were contacted during week six. Some students participated; however, 30 participants or more are recommended in order to determine a relationship. A second group of 424 students in Summer D term were contacted during week one. With these two groups combined, a total of 39 participants responded.

Data Analysis

Students' learning preferences were tested to identify how they prefer to learn. *Felder's ILS* was utilized as a tool to assess these learning preferences. While the *Felder's ILS* places the students on a continuum instead of into one polar category or the other, some researchers have explored correlations between two specific variables using the *Felder's ILS* as this study did (Felder & Brent, 2005; Husch, 2001; Zywno, 2003). The *Literary Response Questionnaire* assessed the student's approach to literature. The demographic survey was used only to report the actual demographics of the sample. The data were run as Nominal data with a Chi-square for analysis. This would test the statistical significance of the relationship between the two nominal variables. A Chi-square is appropriate because this study sought to test an association between two variables measured by categories (Creswell, 2014, p. 164). The results were recoded as the tables below:

Learning Styles

1- Mild Active

2- Moderate Active

3- Strong Active

4- Mild Reflective

5- Moderate Reflective

6- Strong Reflective

7- Mild Sensing

8- Moderate Sensing

9- Strong Sensing

10- Mild Intuitive

11- Moderate Intuitive

12- Strong Intuitive

13- Mild Visual

14- Moderate Visual

15- Strong Visual

16- Mild Verbal

17- Moderate Verbal

18- Strong Verbal

19- Mild Sequential

20- Moderate Sequential

21- Strong Sequential

22- Mild Global

23- Moderate Global

24- Strong Global

Student Approach to Literature

1- Insight

2- Empathy

3- Imagery Vividness

4- Leisure Escape

5- Concern with the Author

6- Story-Driven Reading

7- Rejecting Literary Values

In the event that a participant was matched with two Literary Approaches (which occurred twice), a hyphenated version was used to indicate this. SPSS was used to run that statistical analysis of the Chi-Square.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Three sections of "Composition and Literature" students were invited to participate in the study. These students were contacted in week six of an eight-week course. Sixteen students responded, which was not enough to determine a statistically significant relationship, so a larger group of 424 students was contacted in week one of an eight-week course. A total of 43 participants responded; however, four responses were deleted due to incomplete surveys or the participant declining on the informed consent document. This left a total of 39 participants.

Demographics

The participants self-reported their demographics. Forty-six percent were male and 54% were female. As for age, 8 participants were in their 20s, 14 participants were in their 30s, 11 participants were in their 40s, and six participants were in their 50s. The mean age of participants was 38. The participants also self-reported their race. Eighty-four percent reported white, 3% reported Hispanic or Latino, 11% reported Black or African American, and 3% reported Other.

As for class standing, 10% were freshmen, 18% were sophomores, 38% were juniors, and 33% were seniors. The participants reported their majors: seven were Interdisciplinary Studies, two were Nursing, twelve were Psychology, four were Religion, two were Counseling, eight were Business, three were Education, and one was Criminal Justice. In regards to their high school education, 87% attended a public high school, 3% attended a private high school, and 10% attended a private Christian high school.

Results

Learning Styles Results

The participants' learning styles were determined using *Felder's ILS*. Each participant

was categorized as mild, moderate, or strong for each learning style category in *Felder's ILS*, including Active, Reflective, Sensing, Intuitive, Visual, Verbal, Sequential, and Global. Since these categories are set on four separate polar scales, the participant's score on one side of the scale would affect the opposite side. For example, a Mild Active learner would be a Strong Reflective learner. Similarly, a Moderate Active learner would also be a Moderate Reflective learner.

The participants' approach to literature was measured by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*. Using the highest scored category, the participant was labeled under that approach. In the case of a tie between two approaches (which occurred twice), a hyphenated label of the two categories was used.

RQ1: What is the nature of the relationship between Learning Styles and Approach to Literature as measured by the *Felder's ILS* and *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

$H_0$1: There is no significant relationship between student learning style as shown by *Felder's ILS* and his or her response to literature as shown by *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

Chi-Square Results

A Chi-Square test was used to test for a relationship between each of the learning styles and approaches to literature. A relationship was found between each Learning Style category and Approach to Literature. Because $p < .050$, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there is a significant relationship between student learning style and response to literature.

Table 1

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
ActiveLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
ReflectiveLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
SensingLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
IntuitiveLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
VisualLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
VerbalLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
SequentialLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%
GlobalLS * ApproachtoLit	39	100.0%	0	0.0%	39	100.0%

Table 2

Active Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 61.5, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
ActiveLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	9
	moderate	0	2	2	2	1	7	0	0	11	25
	strong	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 3

Active Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	61.506[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	29.131	24	.215
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 4

Reflective Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 60.05, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
ReflectiveLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1	1	5
	moderate	0	2	2	2	1	6	0	0	11	24
	strong	0	3	1	0	0	1	0	2	2	9
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 5

Reflective Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	60.052[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	29.555	24	.200
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 6

Sensing Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 62.71, p < .001

Count

		Approach to Lit									
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
SensingLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	4
	moderate	0	1	3	1	0	3	1	3	5	17
	strong	0	3	0	1	0	4	0	0	9	17
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 7

Sensing Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	62.717[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	32.389	24	.118
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 8

Intuitive Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 59.62, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
IntuitiveLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	3	0	1	0	4	0	1	9	18
	moderate	0	1	3	1	0	3	1	2	5	16
	strong	0	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	4
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 9

Intuitive Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	59.623[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	28.452	24	.241
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 10

Visual Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 57.74, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
VisualLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	1	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	5
	moderate	0	2	1	0	0	5	1	1	10	20
	strong	0	2	1	2	0	2	0	2	4	13
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 11

Visual Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	57.744[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.523	24	.281
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 35 cells (97.2%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 12

Verbal Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 59.44, p < .001

Count

		Approach to Lit									
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
VerbalLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	2	1	2	0	2	0	2	5	14
	moderate	0	3	1	0	0	5	1	1	9	20
	strong	0	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	4
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 13

Verbal Learning and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	59.448[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	27.644	24	.275
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 14

Sequential Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 67.92, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
SequentialLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	2	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	6
	moderate	0	1	0	0	1	7	0	2	6	17
	strong	0	2	2	0	0	2	1	0	8	15
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 15

Sequential Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	67.922[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	39.842	24	.022
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Table 16

Global Learning Style and Approach to Literature: X^2 (24, N = 39) = 67.7, p < .001

Count

			Approach to Lit								
			imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
GlobalLS		1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
	mild	0	2	2	0	0	2	1	0	8	15
	moderate	0	2	0	0	1	7	0	2	6	18
	strong	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	5
Total		1	5	3	2	1	9	1	3	14	39

Table 17

Global Learning Style and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	67.705[a]	24	.000
Likelihood Ratio	37.525	24	.039
N of Valid Cases	39		

a. 34 cells (94.4%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .03.

Gender and Approach to Literature

A relationship between a student's gender and approach to literature was also found.

RQ2: What is the nature of the relationship between gender and Response to Literature as measured by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*?

$H_0$2: There is no significant relationship between gender and Response to Literature as shown by the *Literary Response Questionnaire*.

A Chi-Square test was used to test for a relationship between gender and approach to literature. In this case, 38 participants were used (as opposed to 39) because one participant did not fill out his or her gender. Because $p < .050$, the null hypothesis was rejected, indicating that there is a significant relationship between gender and a student's response to literature.

Table 18

Case Processing Summary

	Cases					
	Valid		Missing		Total	
	N	Percent	N	Percent	N	Percent
Gender * ApproachtoLit	38	100.0%	0	0.0%	38	100.0%

Table 19

*Gender * ApproachtoLit Crosstabulation:* X^2 (16, N = 38) = 42.59, p < .001

Count		Approach to Lit								
		imagery vividness	insight	insight-concern	insight-imagery	leisure escape	leisure escape-st	rejection of lit	story-driven	Total
Gender	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
	f 0	1	2	1	0	6	1	2	7	20
	m 0	3	1	1	1	3	0	1	6	16
Total	2	4	3	2	1	9	1	3	13	38

Table 20

Gender and Approach to Literature Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	42.595[a]	16	.000
Likelihood Ratio	20.820	16	.186
N of Valid Cases	38		

a. 25 cells (92.6%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .05.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Summary of the Findings

This study sought to determine a relationship between online students' learning styles and approach to literature. In addition, this study also considered a relationship between an online student's gender and approach to literature. Using a Chi-Square, the results both showed $p < .001$, which indicates a very high relationship. In this case, both null hypotheses were rejected to conclude that there is a statistically significant relationship between a student's learning style and approach to literature as well as a statistically significant relationship between a student's gender and approach to literature.

Relationship between Learning Style and Approach to Literature

When digging into the findings, the approaches of Leisure Escape and Story-Driven Reading were most common among participants; however, these varied based on learning style. Those participants scoring high for Story-Driven Reading also were identified as being Moderate Active, Moderate Reflective, Moderate Sense, Strong Sensing, Mild Intuitive, Moderate Intuitive, Moderate Visual, Mild Verbal, Moderate Verbal, Moderate Sequential, Strong Sequential, Mild Global, and Moderate Global. Participants scoring high for Leisure Escape were also identified as being Moderate Active, Moderate Reflective, Moderate Visual, Mild Verbal, Moderate Verbal, Moderate Sequential, and Moderate Global. Based on these findings, students with learning styles of Moderate Active, Moderate Reflective, Moderate Sense, Strong Sensing, Mild Intuitive, Moderate Intuitive, Moderate Visual, Mild Verbal, Moderate Verbal, Moderate Sequential, Strong Sequential, Mild Global, and Moderate Global could be encouraged to explore elements of literature that have to do with Story-Driven Reading, such as conflict, plot, theme, and so on. Students scoring high with the learning styles of Moderate Active,

Moderate Reflective, Moderate Visual, Mild Verbal, Moderate Verbal, Moderate Sequential, and Moderate Global could be pointed to analyze literature based on a Leisure Escape approach, so they could note how the author utilizes the setting, mood, tone, characterization, and so on to deepen the overall meaning of the literature.

Relationship between Gender and Approach to Literature

Both males and females scored high for Story-Driven Reading (6 for males and 7 for females) while females scored higher for Leisure Escape than males (6 for females as opposed to 3 for males). Males also branched out to Imagery Vividness (3 males) while only one female scored high for Imagery Vividness. Since both males and females had a Story-Driven Reading and Leisure Escape approach, the instructor could suggest that students consider examining conflict, plot, theme, and so on for Story-Driven Reading or could note how the author utilizes the setting, mood, tone, characterization, and so on to deepen the overall meaning of the literature for Leisure Escape. Although, males exhibited an Imagery Vividness approach as well, and so it could be recommended that males consider analyzing the literature's sensory language, figurative language, and symbolism.

Discussion

Students' Backgrounds and Approach to Literature

When attempting to determine the "right way" to interpret literature, literary critics have argued about where to place an emphasis: the reader, the text, history, gender, culture, the inaccessibility of truth, or some vague combination of all approaches. Perhaps unknowingly, the college student reader stumbles into the middle of this debate in the freshmen-level literature course. This is significant: this student is likely unaware of the debate and can offer a purer glimpse of the reader. Unbattered by biases concerning criticism, this student might wish to

learn more about literature, but, at the same time, could be more interested in earning an adequate grade to step out of this general education requirement and check off a necessary prerequisite on a degree completion plan. Ever-present, though, is that student's background. Bagwell (1983) summarized Stanley Fish's stance on a reader's predisposed approach to texts in saying that "interpretive constraints are in effect prior to consciousness" (p. 127), indicating that there is something deeper to be explored in the reader than just the text itself. The student's learning styles and gender could inform how the student approaches literature. That is, the "right" way to approach literature is not of concern in this study. Instead, helping students understand the relationship between their backgrounds and their approach to literature can serve as a means of teaching a student how he or she thinks and would ultimately analyze literature in a more natural way.

Helping students understand how they would approach literature the best is of even more importance in the online setting so that students can work to develop autonomous learning skills. Students must understand how their backgrounds impact how they process information in the online classroom (Ceballos, 2009; Furst-Bowe, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). Understanding the connection between students' learning preferences and how they respond to literature can greatly help instructors when guiding students in analyzing literature while also pushing the student to expanding his or her perspectives and critical thinking skills. Michael G. Moore (2011) explains in his Transactional Distance Theory that

> the learner's behavior is based on his or her need for dialogue while the instructor strives to maintain a certain rate of structure to ensure that learning objectives are achieved; thus, the dynamic of interaction between the learner and the instructor determines the level of transactional distance at each point in time. (p. 59)

Faculty members should work to support students while also helping students learn how to direct themselves.

Meta-Cognition and "Learning to Learn"

The aim of this study is to encourage students to become self-aware of how they think in order to then reflect and self-regulate while interacting with literature. As such, meta-cognition is the act of observing and adjusting one's cognitive process (Brown et al., 1983; Flavell, 1979). Students can further become a part of their learning process by paying attention to learning styles and approach to literature; while analyzing literature, the students can identify a problem in the thinking process and adjust their approach to the literature and re-focus (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983). Instead of growing frustrated with an incompatible or mismatched approach to literature, the student can take a step back to re-examine the subject (Schmidt & Ford, 2003).

Relevance in Current Research

Online courses are comprised of students with diverse learning styles, and this study aimed to find ways to meet the needs of students coming from various backgrounds. Brown-Syed et al. (2008) affirmed this idea in their study looking at learning styles in the online and residential settings. They were interested in determining if learning styles impacted a student's decision to choose a residential or online setting for Library Science courses. Using *Felder's ILS* to identify learning styles, they found no correlation between student learning style and whether the students chose a residential or online course.

How a student learns can change as the student is exposed to new experiences in the classroom. This study aimed to determine a relationship between the student's background (learning style and gender) and approach to literature. By determining this relationship, the

student can "learn to learn" and exercise meta-cognition to then grow in his or her critical thinking skills. Siriopoulos and Pomonis (2007) found in a study with 68 post-graduate Business students that learning styles can and do change throughout a course. In this study, the students participated in two phases (spring 2005 and winter 2005-2006) with two instruments: *Kolb's Learning Style Inventory* and the *California Critical Thinking Skills Test*. They concluded that the students further developed critical thinking skills, which impacted their learning styles, causing them to become more balanced learners.

Erik van Shooten and Ron Oostdam's (2001) study was most similar to this study as they also explored students' backgrounds and approaches to literature. Utilizing the *Literary Response Questionnaire*, they explored what predictors would signal how students responded to literature. However, their participants were between the ages 13 to 15 instead of being over 18. With a focus on students' culture activities (such as going to a museum, the library, and so on) and vocabulary, van Shooten and Oostdam found that girls held higher scores of Leisure Escape, Insight, Empathy, Imagery Vividness, and a lower score of Rejecting Literary Value. As one might expect, those students with higher vocabulary scores also scored higher in Imagery Vividness, Leisure Escape, and Trance. The students in "higher types of education programs" (p. 19) scored higher on Leisure Escape, Story-Driven Reading, Empathy, Imagery Vividness, and Trance, yet there was no significant difference concerning Insight, Concern with Author, Rejecting Literary Values, or second-order factor Literary Interpretation. Also, those students who read fiction more in their logs also scored higher on Leisure Escape, Insight, Empathy, Concern with Author, Imagery Vividness, Trance, and Literary Interpretation as well as lower on Rejecting Literary Values. Students that came from a "culturally more sophisticated home environment" (p. 19) held a lower response on Rejecting Literary Values and scored higher on

all aspects of literary response.

In the study at hand, similar results were found. While working with a very different setting (a freshmen-level college literature course instead of a middle school course), this study found that females were more likely to score higher for Leisure Escape, which is also what van Shooten and Oostdam (2001) reported. In this study, both males and females scored high on Story-Driven Reading. Similarly, van Shooten and Oostdam (2001) listed Story-Driven Reading among the approaches that students in "higher types of education programs" trended toward. Since van Shooten and Oostdam's participants were ages 13 to 15 and this study instead focused on a college freshmen-level literature course, perhaps this difference in participants explains why so many of the participants in this study leaned toward Story-Driven Reading.

Study Limitations

The study did have a few limitations. First, the study was conducted at one online university. While the university's students come from all across the United States (and also include international students), the university is a non-profit, Christian university. This Christian perspective and value system could influence how students view literature. For example, many Christians view the Bible as an inerrant work of God, which places value on the author's message, so a Christian might approach literature with concern for the author. Additionally, many Christians reject postmodern thought since they believe that it is possible to arrive at universal truths. As a result, Christian readers might be less inclined to reject literary values when approaching literature. Also, the study was conducted in the summer semester. Taking summer courses is optional in order for students to maintain enrollment, and some students are trying to "get ahead" in the summer terms. Summer students are unique in that they are sometimes more proactive. This personality type could have impacted the sample of learning

styles. The first group of students to participate had some exposure to the "Composition and Literature" course, so their approach to literature could have been informed by the lessons within the "Composition and Literature" course. The second group of students were just beginning the "Composition and Literature" course. They took the survey during the first two weeks of the course, lessening their exposure to the "Composition and Literature" course material. While this sampling at two different times in the course would make the study more balanced, it is worth noting that more students had less exposure to "Composition and Literature" than those who did.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, conducting a similar study at different sites would be helpful. Seeking to duplicate this study at other online universities would be beneficial in broadening the population. While this study had a sample of 39 participants, it would be helpful to have a larger sample in order to determine a relationship. In a future study, perhaps including an incentive to participate would encourage more participants to take the surveys. Moore (2011) wrote that "[a]nalytical information concerning learning and study patterns … can also help individual students, teachers and instructional designers also make informed decisions about their own academic teaching and design activities and strategies" (p. 361). Continuing to gather data will help to recognize trends and measure degrees of the relationships between student learning styles and approach to literature.

Conclusion

This study is significant because it is the first of its kind to explore how learning style and gender affect how online students interact with literature. Previous studies have explored students' learning styles in courses (Choi, Lee, & Kang, 2009; Sahin 2009), how adult learners' performance can be encouraged in the online setting (Cheren, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Huang,

2002; Knowles et al., 1998; Mathews, 1999; Pettazzoni, 2008; Sciuto, 2002), and how students' cultural activities correlate with approach to literature (van Shooten & Oostdam, 2001); however, this is the first study to determine a relationship between a student's learning style or gender and approach to literature. By acknowledging that the student's learning style impacts how he or she approaches literature, the student can become more aware of how he or she can write about literature for analytical essays. Students can go beyond reading comprehension and analyze the literature. In this way, students can use meta-cognitive strategies to become more autonomous learners. Rosenblatt (1978) argued that reading is an experience and meaning is arrived at when the reader has a transaction with the text. That event, as Rosenblatt calls it, results in interpretation. If students become aware of what they bring to the text (in the instance of this study, their learning styles and gender), perhaps they can better learn to learn and develop meta-cognition. Additionally, instructors can consider these relationships while guiding students in their studies. Making literature more accessible and relatable can help instructors avoid a disconnect between the online student and the classroom that many scholars have warned about (Ceballos, 2009; Furst-Bowe, 2002; Holmberg, 1995; Pettazzoni, 2008). Moore's Transactional Distance Theory explained that as dialog decreases in the distance course, transactional distance increases (2011). Instructors can begin to engage in conversation with students concerning their approach to literature based on the students' backgrounds, thus increasing dialog and decreasing distance in the online course. Students may feel more connected to the literature within the course and curriculum. To echo Terry Eagleton (1996) once again, "we always interpret literary works to some extent in the light of our own concerns" (p. 10). This study demonstrates that a student's learning style and gender both have a relationship with approach to literature.

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APPENDIX A: Demographic Document

Major: _____ __Freshman __Sophomore __Junior ___Senior
Age: _____ Race: _____
__Public High School __Private High School __Private Christian High School

APPENDIX B: E-mail Correspondence Regarding Felder ILS Permission

On Thu, May 9, 2013 at 8:20 AM, Robinson, Katie Elizabeth < > wrote:
Dr. Brian Eller,
My name is Katie Robinson and I am a doctorate candidate working on my dissertation for my Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. For my dissertation, I am conducting a correlation study concerning post-secondary student learning styles and their approach to literature. In my research, I was hoping to utilize the Felder ILS.
From the Felder ILS website through ncsu.edu, I noticed that access to the Felder ILS for educators is free for research purposes. However, I wanted to be sure that I fall under this category and do not need to purchase a license. I certainly would not want to compromise the agreement.
If you have any questions regarding my project, please let me know. Thank you for your help!
Katie Robinson
Instructional Mentor & Instructor
College of General Studies
On Thu, May 9, 2013 at 1:58 PM, Eller, Brian < > wrote:
Hey Katie,
From what you described that sounds definitely like it would be for a research purpose and you would have access to the Felder ILS, without having to purchase a license. I wish you the best of luck on your Ed.D. and dissertation.
Kind regards,
Brian Eller, J.D.
Licensing Associate
Office of Technology Transfer
North Carolina State University

APPENDIX C: IRB Exemption Letter

Dear Katie,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and that no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101 (b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:

> (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
> (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and that any changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption, or need assistance in determining whether possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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