INSTRUCTOR INTERACTION AS IT RELATES TO FACILITATION OF SPIRITUAL
DEVELOPMENT WITHIN AN EVANGELICAL INSTITUTION: A CASE STUDY

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the impact of instructor interaction on the facilitation of spiritual development in an online environment for undergraduate non-religion majors attending a distinctively evangelical university. The qualitative case study shadows and evaluates three sections of a required introductory religion course. Over the period of one academic term, the following online interactions were observed in order to gauge potential facilitation of spiritual development: announcements, emails, forums, assignment feedback, and course content. An interview was conducted with the instructor following the course to understand how they engaged the course and their perspective in doing so. This interview process included seeking the individual student’s perception of how the instructor’s interaction affected them personally. The results from the study indicated that instructors do have the opportunity to influence a student’s experience as it relates to spiritual growth through their personal encouragement, empathy with the student and regular engagement within the course.

Descriptors: Online Learning, higher education, asynchronous learning, spiritual development, spirituality, instructor interaction
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my son Benji. Before you were born, you blessed our hearts and the hearts of others. You have drawn us more to God and caused us to praise Him. You have caused us to be grateful for the little blessings and the moments that we have with one another. You have taught us that God uses our weaknesses to reveal His strength. And though the world will tell you to live by their expectations, only the Lord knows the great plans that He has in store for you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Foremost, I would like to acknowledge my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who I constantly leaned upon not only during this academic endeavor, but during my entire academic experience. Since I was a child, James 1:5 has constantly been on my lips. Though I know now its focus is not on human knowledge, the truth transcends to all areas of our lives in which we need guidance.

I would like to give praise as well to my wife and family who have weathered this journey with me. Hannah, you encouraged me to keep going when I no longer felt like going. You told me to push harder when I no longer felt like pushing. You are my Estrella, my guiding star…without you I would be lost at sea. Thank you as well to my children who are an inspiration for me to take time to enjoy the little moments in the midst of the insanity.

Thank you as well Mom and Dad who taught me to always do my best and to follow the path that God has opened. You were there for me when I struggled as a child with even speaking simple words and cheered me along each step of the way.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

Since the beginning of the 21st Century, there has been an emergence of online learning as a result of the development and refining of asynchronous tools. Allen and Seaman (2010) identified that from Fall 2002 to Fall 2009 online learning rose from 1.6 million learners to 5.6 million learners. Furthermore, Sener (2010) predicted that not only will all courses within higher education utilize online learning, but this will happen within 5 to 10 years. Moloney and Oakley (2010) identified ten factors that can be attributed to the success of online programs between universities, including: institutions which focus on the unique needs of online students, degrees which can be obtained solely online (not just individual courses), and course design which focuses on the development of community through both the interaction of the instructor and students. Online programs have not only been on the rise, but, as indicated by Moloney and Oakley (2010), specific steps must be taken to retain the online student and community.

One of the central components of online learning and its success rests upon Vygotsky’s (1978) Social Constructivism which argues that effective learning must take place within community. Naturally, this seems to be a point of contention for those who favor face to face interaction as there is greater physical distance between online learners; however, the effects can be mitigated through purposeful online interaction which decreases this distance regardless of physical locality (Mahmood, Mahmood, & Malik, 2012). Further, the authors stressed that this distance can be mitigated by the instructor’s attitude and intentionality within the online learning environment (Mahmood et al., 2012). Woo and Reeves (2007) identified that the establishment of community within the online learning environment is a result of multiple factors, including:
the interactions between the learner with the content, learner with the instructor, and the learner with other learners. Wood, Brunnel, and Ross (1976), whose work is closely associated with the Vygtosky’s Zone of Proximal Development, coined the term “scaffolding” to identify the instructor’s unique responsibility to understand the distance between the student’s actual development level and their potential development level. This “scaffolding” consists of establishing goals in order to reach learning and community objectives. It is the instructor who plays a primary role to ensure that not only is the information disseminated, but that critical thinking skills are fostered.

Within this role, the instructor seeks to impart academic knowledge and the associated learning skills; however, the purpose and aim of the institution in which the instructor is a part does not end there. Its overall mission serves not only to provide a focal point for the academic experience, but to further refine the purpose between the institution and its primary stake holders (Abelman, Atkin, Dalessandro, Snyder-Suhy, & Janstova, 2007). A key component of the student’s success is not only their experience within an individual course, but their overall experience with the institution (Moloney & Oakley, 2010). This mission and goal of the institution should not only be reflective of the residential program, but also the online programs. Moloney and Oakley (2010) focused on the institution’s need to incorporate the goals of their online programs into their overall mission.

Evangelical institutions of higher education in particular seek to not only impart academic knowledge, but establish and foster spiritual development. Grand Canyon University, a distinctively evangelical institution offering online courses, stated the following in concern to their Christian position: “To help our students find their purpose and achieve their full potential, we integrate our Christian faith into everything we do” (Grand Canyon, 2011, p. 1). In an
advertising campaign, Regent University (2011) focused specifically on the role of the instructor in the process of spiritual growth by highlighting the professors’ role as a mentor and the purpose of being equipped as a Christian leader during one’s study at Regent. Liberty University’s School of Education (2012a) stated within its Conceptual Framework that it seeks not only have students know Christian values and its moral framework, but also to implement their God-given abilities within their appropriate field. Olson (2011) identified that this focus on spiritual development is appropriate as the purposeful design of the course and intentional interactions can help foster this growth. This focus, though not academic, is appropriate to include within the institution’s goals and mission as it is distinctively evangelical.

Literature describing the instructor’s interaction as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual development is limited in focus. Maddix and Estep (2010) stressed the validity of spiritual development and provided a corresponding method of how this could be implemented within a graduate school; however, this method utilizes a mentorship model and focuses upon students who have already expressed an interest in spirituality and ministry. Shore (2007) identified the social presence that the instructor should have within an online course, but is drawn primarily from personal reflection of interaction with seminarian students and not structured analysis based upon research. Hege (2011) drew on personal experience within a seminary course and gave practical application for engagement, but limits his discussion on the formation of spiritual development. Rovai, Baker and Cox (2008) conducted research contrasting the sense of community between Christian and secular schools, but failed to address any concerns which related to spiritual development. However, they also concluded that further study should be completed which was reflective of the student’s overall experience at a Christian institution (Rovai et al., 2008).
The subject of spirituality is not absent within secular institutions. Speck (2005) identified that though there has been resurgence within the issue of spirituality, research has been limited due to the individual and private nature of spirituality with a lack of empirical evidence. Speck further identified that this is particularly the case within the discipline of Nursing as it has its roots within the Church; however, the focus is on spiritual awareness as opposed to spiritual development. Razak (2011) addressed the issue of spiritual development from a secular definition by citing the importance of the instructor engaging the students to ask deeper and more thought provoking questions on the meaning of life. However, no evidence is given to substantiate the author’s pedagogy of spiritual development. Groen (2008) provided self-reflection of a graduate course taught on spirituality and role as an instructor in providing spiritual guidance. Though Groen cited positive spiritual development, no measures were present to draw this conclusion, aside from one student’s comment which was made on the course evaluation survey.

In an evangelical university where there is an expressed commitment to faith and spiritual development, the instructor plays a consequential role within the online learning environment. Hines, McGee, Waller, and Waller (2009) stressed that evangelical institutions must ensure that their programs match with their overall mission and further investigation must be completed to ensure that these objectives are being met. In much the same way that proactive steps and scaffolding are taken to encourage academic growth, this study sought to understand the manner in which instructors attempted to foster spiritual development within an online learning environment. As a result of this study, other evangelical institutions may be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their own programs and whether purposeful attempts are being made to these institutional objectives for spiritual development (Hines et al., 2009).
Situation to Self

Serving as an instructor within an evangelical institution’s religion department, the issue of an instructor’s effectiveness within the facilitation of spiritual development is not only a concern for professional development, but an indication of whether I am being effective as a minister within the Christian faith. This issue of stewardship focuses on whether the instructor is being purposeful with their interactions and the differences that are made as a result. Online pedagogy stresses the importance of the instructor serving not only as a proctor, but as a facilitator (Rovai & Barnum, 2003; Swan, 2002); therefore, my understanding of social constructivism places a high importance upon every potential online interaction. Though some may see Discussion Boards as the equivalent of an attendance grade, it is my belief that these activities are what helps foster critical thinking skills and engages course content with practical truths. As a result of these viewpoints, it is possible that a lack of participation by the instructor may be concluded as a lost opportunity to foster community and impart knowledge.

The setting of this study was held at the same institution in which I am employed. From personal experience, there is an emphasis made by the administration which encourages purposeful instructor interaction which transcends academic objectives to spiritual truth; therefore there is an expectation to see this level of interaction within the course. The specific course sections were not those in which I am a supervisor or personally teaching. There was no formal relationship established with the participants of this study and the relationships held with the instructors were amiable yet on a professional basis.

Problem Statement

As distinctively evangelical institutions focus is to impart a Christian worldview (Rhea, 2011), there is a need to determine the impact instructor interaction has upon spiritual
development within an online learning environment. In a residential setting, creating an 
environment which encourages students in spiritual development is met through such avenues as 
course instruction, faculty and staff interaction, Student Affairs and Spiritual Life Department 
programming (Muntz & Crabtree, 2006; Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009). However, there are 
differences in the manner in which online students are engaged. Liberty University does not 
 require online students to attend convocation though it is required for residential students 
(Liberty University, 2012b) nor does it provide the online equivalent of student/staff mentorship 
that is found in the Student Leadership Department (Liberty University, 2012c). Grand Canyon 
University (2011) also requires residential students to attend an on-campus chapel/convocation 
throughout the semester, participate in small groups, or take part in leadership development in a 
discipleship program. These are not required with the online programs.

The differences also extend to how students perceive the role of the instructor in relation 
to student affairs. In a study of graduate online nursing students (Taylor & Holley, 2009), it was 
identified that students confided in their instructors for student support instead of the established 
Student Affairs staff. The faculty members “saw themselves as sources of support services as 
well as conveyers of academic content” (Taylor & Holley, 2009, p. 94). Lowe (2010) stated, 
“The content covered in a theological course, however, or the interaction between peers and 
faculty may provide a window into the assessment of spiritual formation in an online 
environment” (2010, p. 2). Therefore, the various methods of interaction attempted by the 
instructor needs to be studied as a means of possibly encouraging the further facilitation of 
spiritual development. This was accomplished in this study by identifying the instructor’s self-
perception of methods utilized, the methods actually employed, and the student’s perception of 
the instructor’s interaction.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the contribution of instructor interaction on the facilitation of spiritual development in an online environment for undergraduate non-religion majors attending a distinctively evangelical university. Instructor interaction is to be understood as purposeful interaction on part of the instructor to engage the student in the establishment of an online learning environment. To fit this criterion, interaction does not necessarily need to be initiated by the instructor as long as the response by the instructor is purposeful. Spiritual development is to be understood as any attempt to engrain spiritual truths into one’s daily life and practice as articulated by an evangelical Christian worldview and seek to challenge students in their current beliefs for the purpose of being in proper relationship with Christ – to be more like Him (Ma, 2003; Morris, Beck, & Smith, 2004; Rhea, 2011; White, 2006; Wilhoit, Setran, Ratcliff, Haase, & Rosema, 2009). This study sought to explore the various methods employed by the instructor in an attempt to facilitate spiritual development.

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the contribution of instructor interaction as it relates to facilitation of spiritual development in an online environment. The following questions guided this study:

1. How, if at all, do instructors contribute to the spiritual development of students in an online course at a distinctively evangelical institution? The role of the instructor as defined by the course design and additional purposeful interactions was observed as they contribute to the spiritual development of the student. Additionally, instructors were asked to identify methods utilized and along with how they perceived their role in the facilitation of spiritual development.
2. What is the students’ perception of how instructor interaction challenges their spiritual development at a distinctively evangelical institution? The impact of the instructor is limited to the student’s perception. If the student does not perceive the instructor’s involvement, then there is no readily identified impact. The research sought to identify the student’s perception of how the instructor was involved in the facilitation of spiritual development and the connection to various techniques applied.

**Significance of the Study**

The research examined instructor interaction in an online learning environment in relation to fostering spiritual development. This qualitative case study sought to specifically observe interactions within an evangelical institution which is unique to its mission and statement. The research identified specific tactics and techniques employed by the instructor to foster this environment. By obtaining the perceptions of the students the goal was to help gauge the effectiveness of those interactions. At the conclusion of the study, specific techniques are identified which address effectiveness of these elements and the responsiveness of students to these techniques.

The research presented focused on the various methods of interaction attempted by the instructor to encourage the further facilitation of spiritual development at a distinctively evangelical institution. An important aspect of this study was not just to identify the methods used, but to understand the perception of the instructor and the student in regards to these techniques. By gauging these perceptions through interviews and verifying these online interactions, the methods to establish and foster spiritual development were more properly investigated. By reviewing this study, the reader should be better able to identify and appreciate the instructor’s role as a facilitator within the realm of spiritual development.
Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

For the purposes of this study, the interactions were focused on a religion course which is required for non-religion majors. Undergraduate degree plans within evangelical institutions will have courses set aside specifically for the purpose of addressing a Christian worldview. Though there is an expectation of integration of the instructor’s faith within all courses, these courses specifically seek to challenge the student’s spiritual development and address various topics which pertain directly to the mission of the institution. Therefore, the interactions which take place should be more purposeful in connecting academic knowledge with spiritual truth and thus provide identifiers for potential effective interactive techniques.

Religion majors were not included in this study as they would be more likely to seek spiritual development through taking an online religion course by nature of their interest. Though this could be said for the average student attending an evangelical institution, by choosing non-religion majors the pool should have a greater balance. By focusing on a required religion course for all students, this would negate any preconceived expectations from an elective course of the student’s choosing. An elective course may be chosen by a student for the purpose of spiritual development while a required course would leave a more general pool of students. Only three sections of the same course were chosen to limit the scope of the research. This should give a well-balanced approach to the various techniques which are utilized and focuses on the interaction of at least three different instructors. Similarities and dissimilarities can thus be observed in order to distinguish between varying types of interactions and the building of community within the course for the purpose of spiritual development.

Limitations
This study was limited in its ability to solicit students who are ready and equipped to engage in a course which sought to impart a Christian Worldview. As a result, some students could have been hostile to the approach and did not see the importance in being required to take the course even though they have chosen to study at an evangelical institution. Not all students may have felt the need to engage with the course content, instructor, and fellow students an in-depth manner. These students may have limited their interactions to the minimum requirements in order to fulfill the objectives for the course. As a result, these students may have given poor feedback or may not have engaged in the material designed to have an impact upon spiritual development. It should be noted that this same type of attitude could be expected within a residential setting as the students themselves may not be receptive to engage and question spiritual truths.

The study focused on only one evangelical university and only one particular course. However, the purpose of this study was not to determine the success of a particular course, but to observe the impact of the instructor’s interaction. Regardless of the discipline, the observations made from the qualitative case study should have helped identify the role that the instructor has on the facilitation of spiritual development within an online course. Furthermore, the interviews hoped to provide an opportunity to understand the perceptions of the participants, both instructor and student, within this developmental process.

**Research Plan**

This research was qualitative in nature and employed a qualitative case study approach to gather data. The research plan sought to identify specific methods which are utilized by the instructor in order to facilitate spiritual development. An interview was conducted with the instructor to identify potential practices utilized and to identify instructor’s perception of how
this was accomplished. These practices, as identified by the instructor, were intentionally reviewed within the course and reflected upon. In addition, the various interactions were documented to identify areas in which the instructor may not have perceived to have an influence. This includes interaction with the instructor themselves, the course content, and other students. Data was triangulated by asking students to complete an open ended survey at the end of the course, with an option for a potential follow up interview, for the purpose of identifying overall perception and verified whether they believed the techniques utilized were realized within the course.

A qualitative case study was chosen as it provides an examination of a current environment in which the various interactions that take place can be recorded within their proper context by providing a corresponding rich and detailed narrative (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012), conducting a case study investigating the quality of online interaction, stated that the use of a case study should be utilized “where the investigators have little or no possibility of controlling events and the study is on contemporary phenomena in a real-life context” (p. 9). Hines et al. (2009) published findings from a case study conducted at Trinity School for Ministry which helped to identify methods utilized to facilitate spiritual development within a seminary course. Osborne (2011) as well utilized a case study approach followed by interview type questions for further reflection. This approach has provided an opportunity to see the detailed inner workings of the online environment as it related specifically to the instructor’s role as he or she attempted to facilitate spiritual development. This is the type of detailed information which needed to be seen within its context and not ascertained from the quantitative data.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

By nature individuals are social beings. As a result, knowledge and growth come through interaction within social contexts and that which is gleaned is dependent upon both the quantity and quality of information which is given. In a higher education setting, growth is not just limited to academic goals, but also that which is related to one’s social and emotional interaction. Within religious institutions, this would also include objectives which focus upon one’s spiritual development. Regent University set as their top goal for their Strategic Plan for 2010-2015 the following: “A Christ-centered worldview is vital to the current life and long range future of Regent University. Deliberate efforts, led by faculty, to retain and strengthen this worldview will be implemented across all aspects of the university” (Regent University, 2009, p. 1). Liberty University identified in their Statement of Mission and Purpose that the institution will: “Promote the synthesis of academic knowledge and Christian worldview in order that there might be a maturing of spiritual, intellectual, social and physical value-driven behavior” (Liberty University, 2011, p. 1). Online learning provides a unique challenge as these various goals are no longer met in a face to face interaction, but at a distance through the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools.

Within the classroom setting, the instructor plays a vital role ensuring that information is being received by the learner as it is their responsibility to not only impart knowledge, but facilitate critical thinking skills. Current research has focused on online learning pedagogy being applied through these social constructs. The focus has been on the learner’s interaction within the classroom and for the purpose of establishing community. The establishment of community
is the result of interaction between the learner with the content, learner with the instructor, and the learner with other learners (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Though research indicated the need for the instructor to play the role of facilitator (Davidson-Shivers, 2009), the focal point of community still rests within the learner’s interaction with other learners.

Much in the same way, evangelical institutions have established various interactions to build spiritual community which then leads to spiritual development. In a residential setting this is done through purposeful resident life programming, required religious services, community service, academic instruction, and mentorship—both in and out of the classroom. The purpose of this literature review is to examine the current literature which is reflective of the instructor’s role within the learning environment, identify the need to establish community in conjunction with perceived learning, and the unique role of spiritual development within an evangelical institution. Within this literature review, the areas of research which are deficient, particularly as they overlap, are highlighted as a cause for this study.

**Theoretical Framework**

Online courses differ not only in delivery from traditional courses, but in the overall approach to learning. Online learners are separated by both time and distance while continuing to live within their own social environment. Bressler, Bressler, and Bressler (2010) identified in a sample of 232 online students that the average age within their survey was 31 years and signified that the older demographic creates potential higher stress which is caused by an increase work load and family. As a result, the traditional approach to learning is not as compatible within the online format as online learning affords more flexibility within its learning approach. Though students can watch a recording of an instructor, there is little to no direct interaction. As a result, the pedagogy which support distance learning changed to integrate
online learning and the establishment of community.

This focus on learning seeks to enable the student to foster critical thinking skills through their various interactions within the course. Moore (1977) focused the intentionality and interactivity of distance learning to teach students how to learn and by doing so mitigating the distance between the learners and the course content. He provided a construct in which the method of instruction was contrasted with both the level of dialogue present and the autonomy of the learning. The less formalized structure and greater amount of dialogue created a higher opportunity for autonomy and critical thinking. Moore (2006) emphasized that this original framework needs to be considered when designing online courses and determining the learning objectives for the course. Jung (2001) provided a further framework by transitioning from open or distance learning to the current online learning environment which utilizes the internet as the medium for instruction. Jung identified that regardless of physical locality the learner is separated from content, instructor, and other learners; therefore, one of the central tenants of online pedagogy is to limit this distance through purposeful interaction. When this is done the learner increases in both autonomy and in collaboration. The student becomes more engaged which leads to a greater sense of community and learning within the course (Jung, 2001).

Community and social interaction play a key role in establishing a learning environment. Vygotsky (1978), a social constructivism theorist, advocated that any method of learning must take place within a social construct. Establishment of community though is not dependent upon the quantity of interaction, but on the quality of interaction as a predictor for overall success and learning (Woo & Reeves, 2007). Nagel, Blignaut, and Cronje (2009) concluded in their study of master degree students at the University of Pretoria that students felt a higher level of trust within
the community of believers when they deemed that the posts submitted were of substantial quality.

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development specifically identified the distance that exists between the student and their learning environment. The instructor’s responsibility is to consider the distance and provide “scaffolding” to reach these levels of learning (Byceson, 2007). Scaffolding consists of specific goals which are to be obtained within learning and methods in order to reach those stated goals. As the student gains a mastery of a specific skill through intentional interaction and design, then a new goal is set until the student has met the said objectives for the course (Byceson, 2007).

The role of an online instructor as a facilitator is a reoccurring theme found within literature and theory. Miller (2001) identified that Person-Centered Learning Theory focuses on the role of the instructor within this capacity while students direct their own learning through their interests and ability. The focus is not for the student to be taught specific information insomuch that they are taught how to learn. Through the learning process the student becomes self-sufficient and has a greater sense of confidence. The instructor challenges the student to think more critically and pursue academic interests (Miller, 2001). Woo and Reeves (2007) identified that the instructor should foster curiosity within the student and assist them as they complete tasks which stretch their cognitive base. As a facilitator, the instructor is responsible for the mood of the entire community, establishment of collaboration, being available as a resource and project an attitude of a continual and critical learner which is then modeled by the learner (Miller, 2001). These same tenants are present in establishing and fostering spiritual development as proper facilitation leads to a challenging of one’s own spiritual beliefs within community (Maddix, 2010b).
Furthermore, Love and Talbot (2009) identified that there is a need for spiritual development to be fostered within Student Affairs even if the institution is secular in nature. Maslow’s Heirarchy of Needs (1971) cited that spiritual development is an essential component of human development. The nature of an individual is directly reflective to how one views themselves in relation to the rest of humanity and their corresponding role. Man is able to grow in this area of development through further gleaning of knowledge and an openness to learn. Willard (1988) warned that this viewpoint is in danger of defining our existence through naturalistic reductionism. Though it is important to understand that one grows spiritually through the imparting of knowledge (for without it how could we come to a greater understanding of our standing in Christ), it is ultimately through the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 12:1–2 (New American Standard Version) states:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

This does not negate the responsibility of cultivating a learning environment, but merely to highlight that from the point of an evangelical Christian that spiritual development is dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of one professing Christ as Lord.

It may be appropriate to weigh Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs with Fowler’s Faith Development Theory (Fowler, 1981) which identifies a progression in which individuals mature in the faith in a series of seven stages. The stages move from a basic and intrinsic trust in the universe to self-identification of one’s own personal beliefs to how those beliefs affect the community as a whole. In a reflection upon his own work, Fowler (2004) stated:
It should never be the primary goal of religious education simply to precipitate and encourage stage advancement. Rather paying attention to stage and stage advancement is important in helping us shape our teaching and involvement with members of religious traditions. Movement in stage development, properly understood, is a byproduct of teaching the substance and practices of faith. (Fowler, 2004, p. 417)

In the case of an evangelical institution, it would seem natural to gage whether spiritual development is taking place as one should grow and mature in their faith; however, it should not be forced to create disingenuous results.

Fostering an environment in which learning takes place does not occur naturally. One of the critiques of online learning is that courses have not been designed with a theoretical base. The vast majority of current research is focused on teaching and learning in contrast to theory and technology management (Zawacki-Richter, Backer, & Vogt, 2009). The instructor may not understand or does not believe that interaction is an important aspect of online courses due to this lack of theoretical base (Rovai, 2002; Woo & Reeves, 2007). Rovai (2002) also identified as well that some instructors believe they can simply set up the course and let it run itself. Miller (2001) identified that continual guidance by the instructor as an expert within their field is needed by the student. Bryceson (2007) proposed an online environment in conjunction with Nonaka’s SECI model in which the instructor is identified as the “Master Weaver” (p.193). Within this role the instructor is able to utilize various technological resources to connect various ideas and to conceptualize their meanings so that the student may internalize the subject matter.

In order for this to take place the instructor needs to be fully aware of what is taking place within the online community. Bryceson (2007) provided a framework called ESCIE in which the student moves from one knowledge base to the next. This is done through helping the
student become aware of the content (explicitization), engaging with the material through social interaction, digesting the content previous learned with the social interaction to internalize the meaning, and then combining previous social constructs in order to externalize the information which was gleaned. Downing, Tsz-fung, Kwong, Downing, and Chan (2007), indicate that students go through a social phase within the online community which is akin to the traditional setting: “socially active phase, an instrumental phase, and then a gradual, and perhaps, natural, process of disengagement” (p. 212).

Current research in concern to interactions which take place within online learning came mainly from the works of Rovai (2002) and Swan (2002). Rovai (2002, p. 4) identified four elements which must be present in order to establish a sense of community and thus facilitate the learning process: spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of learning expectations. Learning must take place in a safe environment where students feel free to express their thoughts and engage the course material. This takes place through a back and forth interaction with other learners and the instructor (Byceson, 2007). Rovai (2002, p.12) also identified seven specific areas in which the instructors themselves can become engaged to encourage students and the community: transactional distance, social presence, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning state, and community size.

While Rovai (2002) focused upon the type of community that existed, Swan (2002) studied the interactions that take place between the student and their environment. These can be identified into three categories: interactions with the content, with the instructor, and with other students. In relation specifically to instructor interaction, Swan (2002) found that student’s perceptions of their instructors had a direct correlation with their satisfaction and overall learning in the course. However, the study also noted that the perceived interaction did not always
correlate with the actual amount of feedback which was present. She suggested that this may account for the difference between quality and quantity of interaction which is present. This research was supported by Sher (2009) who identified a significant correlation between student and instruction interaction with perceived learning and course satisfaction. This can be applied to the area of establishing and fostering spiritual development as there is a correlation between interactions and what is taken away from the course.

The attributes listed above come together to provide an environment in which the student has a feeling of belonging. When there is this sense of belongings students have a greater opportunity to engage with one another and dig deeper within the particular subject matter, in this case the subject being spiritual development. Dialogue has to be more than just social interaction though. Instead it is to be meaningful in content and purposefully constructed through the instructional design of the course. The instructor plays a key role to ensure that the student is being challenged so that learning and a fostering of community may be present.

**Review of the Literature**

**Instructor Interaction**

Quality of interaction between the instructor and the learner provides a suitable environment for learning to take place (Nandi et al., 2012). Furthermore, the researchers concluded within their study that interaction should not be weighted heavily to one party, but should be an equal balance of interaction with the instructor guiding the discussion. The difficulty as noted by Pruitt (2011) is that even though an instructor may create a forum for discussion and interaction to take place, it is ultimately the student who decides whether the material will be engaged. Pruitt (2011) cited professional experience in noting that it is through the instructor’s guidance that the overall morale and enthusiasm for the course is improved.
Nandi et al. (2012) confirmed this assessment by stating that “student–instructor interaction is one of the most critical factors in enhancing student satisfaction in an online Distance Education course” (p. 7-8). Pamuk (2012) found in an analysis of over 1600 responses to a series of questionnaires that from the student’s perspective it is imperative that an online course has clear instruction from the teacher in concern to course expectations, frequent reflection from the course material being covered, and feedback of submitted assignments. Students stated specifically that lack of interaction within the course causes them to feel “lonely in virtual space” (Pamuk, 2012, p. 403). Clear engagement by the instructor is essential for the student’s overall online experience.

Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) identified that current research points to lower levels of communication taking place within the classroom such as low instructor interaction, primarily in the areas of Discussion Boards. The purpose of interaction must lead to a specific and identified outcome (Wanstreet, 2006). Davidson-Shivers (2009) indicated that the primary type of interaction taking place between instructors and students is found within the grade book and interaction initiated by the instructor outside of this is less frequent. However, the nature of online learning is noted as being different from a traditional setting in that communication is primarily written and not verbal (Davidson-Shivers, 2009). This causes an increase in potential work load due to the time to respond in length and repetition.

The majority of studies and course designs suggest that peer interaction is the most important aspect of establishing community; however, current research does not always hold consistent with this line of thinking (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). Furthermore, the study revealed that students did not feel as if interactions with their peers were important nor improved their learning experience. These students indicated that they are not seeking the establishment of
community, but choose the online environment due to the autonomy that could be demonstrated along with its accessibility. Regardless of their motivation, the study found that students desired a greater level of feedback from their instructor in general. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) also identified the specific areas in which students indicated a positive experience with online courses: instructors’ providing prompt feedback, participating in the interactions, encouraging social interaction, and employing collaborative learning strategies (p. 101).

Instructor interaction has a direct impact upon a student’s sense of belonging within the classroom and their overall reciprocal activity. Ouzts (2006) indicated that students who ranked sense of community low identified that they had poor interaction with both their fellow students and their instructor. They identified specifically that their instructor was “either disengaged, unavailable, or . . . were in ‘no man’s land’” (Ouzts, 2006, p. 290-291). However, it should be noted that within this study, students who identified their sense of community high, stated that they had positive interaction with their fellow students and their instructor. Shu-Fang and Aust (2008) found that there was a direct correlation between the immediacy of instructor response and the quantity of interaction from the student. This then in turn is translated into higher course satisfaction. The greater interaction also limited loss in perceived learning. However, it was noted that the correlation may be related only to increase in frequency as a regression analysis indicated that perceived learning was only related to sense of community. Shu-Fang and Aust (2008) indicated that students may have posted more frequently to impress their instructors. However, Xie, DeBacker, and Ferguson (2006) noted the quantity of instructor feedback significantly affected intrinsic motivation. Therefore, the quality of feedback should also be considered.
Research has indicated specific areas in which instructors should be encouraged to continue interacting or even add more interaction. Chang (2009) saw in his research that there was a strong affinity to the use of emails by both students and instructors. Furthermore, it was stated that this type of interaction can be used to communicate course announcements, encourage students, address problems, or further engage the learner with the text. If the instructor is disengaged and does not seek to establish interaction, then students indicated that they felt disengaged towards the course (Ouzts, 2006). Providing quality feedback, clarity in responses and instructions, and promptness to any course issues has been connected with a student’s positive portrayal of an instructor (Change, 2009). Menchaca and Bekele (2008) found that students prioritized critical instructor feedback and instructor engagement in their expectations for the course.

This level of engagement by the instructor has a direct influence upon the student’s overall experience in the course. Xie, DeBacker, and Ferguson (2006) concluded that there was a correlation between the emphasis that an instructor placed upon Discussion Boards and the student’s interaction. If the instructor did not see this as an important aspect, which leads to the building of community, then the students were logically less engaged. As well, to have an impact upon the area of spiritual development the instructor’s interaction within the Discussion Board should be focused upon aiding students in their critical thinking skills as it relates to questions of faith (Maddix, 2010b). Walvoord (2008) suggested that this can be done by providing a forum in which students are able to articulate their thoughts or express a question within an academic setting which relates to their own spiritual development. This allows them to further explore the academic content and apply it on a personal level.
However, not all forms of interaction are beneficial to the student’s experience. There are times when students decide that they do not want to become engaged in the course (Nagel et al., 2009). Chang (2009) found that while Discussion Boards were beneficial for interaction, synchronous tools, such as online chat, were not favored as they created less flexibility within the learning experience. Gerber, Scott, Clements and Sarama (2005) cited that within higher level courses that poorly chosen words and unclear feedback can cause greater confusion and generate lower interaction with students. Thus the authors concluded that instructors must be careful with the type of language and technical jargon which is utilized. This difficulty in interaction is highlighted by the lack of contextual clues which are perceived by students within a traditional classroom (Gerber et al., 2005). This can be mitigated by intentionality of the instructor. Dennen, Darabi, and Dr. Smith (2007, p. 77) identified three specific practices which should be adopted by instructors for clear communication: maintaining frequency of contact; having a regular presence in class discussion spaces; and making expectations clear to learners.

As evangelical institutions identify one of their primary purposes as imparting a Christian worldview (Maddix, 2010b; Rovai et al., 2008), it is appropriate to note the role of the instructor in this process. Liberty University’s College of Arts and Sciences stated the following on their main website: “All professors are dedicated Christians who affirm students in the faith, challenge them to grow spiritually, and encourage them to evaluate all things from a Christ-centered perspective” (Liberty University, 2011a, p. 1). Regent University (2012) promotes to potential students taking online courses that, “Our experienced and knowledgeable professors effectively integrate a Christian perspective into a high standard of academic rigor (p. 1). Furthermore, Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS, 2012) states the following in concern to membership, “The institution operates within a specifically Christian
philosophy of education. Practices and methods emanate from that underlying philosophy of education . . . Both administrators and faculty are involved in the development, implementation, and continuing assessment of a philosophy of education” (TRACS, 2012, p. 31). Spiritual development, instructor inclusion, and integration of spiritual truths are clear aspects of the learning expectation at evangelical institutions. Therefore, it is seen that the instructor’s interaction plays a crucial role in ensuring that these aspects are present within the resulting online community.

**Sense of Community and Perceived Learning**

Evangelical institutions seek to blend the aspects of community with gleaned academic knowledge to foster spiritual development (Ma, 2003; TRACS, 2012). Ripley, Garzon, Hall, Mangis, and Murphy (2009) identified that the interaction, and resulting relationship established between the instructor and the student, is essential to an integration of academic knowledge and spiritual truth. This establishment of community and knowledge comes together to provide an environment which not only allows spiritual formation to take place, but for it to flourish. Love and Gareth (2004) identified that “the underpinning link between community development and spirituality is the connection of the individual to the collective, acknowledging that the well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of the community” (p. 319). Bobilya, Akey, and Mitchell (2011) in a study utilizing a Wilderness Orientation program to foster personal spiritual growth identified that even though students found satisfaction in solitude and meditation that it was a supportive community of students and instructors which undergirded their personal experience. Hines et al, (2009) identified that one strength of seminaries is the ability to go beyond academics and for the faculty to engage students outside the classroom, mentor students, and become involved in hands on ministry. Furthermore, it was
noted that: “Personal relationships become integral to the mission of such a theological institution” (Hines et al., 2009, p. 34).

Therefore, sense of community has a significant correlation to spirituality and should be understood within the role the instructor brings to the classroom. Nagel et al. (2009) connected interactivity with the student’s overall achievement in the course. As more students interacted, the greater they were encouraged to be a part of the community. However, one interesting aspect is that their survey further indicated that even if students had trouble accessing online assignments, they still sought out their instructor and were still able to do well in the course. Nagel et al. (2009) indicated that “the successful students were not only most active online, but were also the most involved in the virtual community” (p. 47). Furthermore, Morris et al. (2004) identified that students who were more comfortable within a religious institution reported a more positive experience overall.

Students may intrinsically seek to establish a sense of community. Wighting et al. (2008) indicated that this push to engage oneself in both community and course work may be an innate trait that makes up online leaners. Consequently, students who enroll in online courses are more willing to study on their own and engage in a more non-traditional and self-motivated approach. The authors encourage further research into whether intrinsic motivation is an indicator for matriculation. Swan (2002) argued that students interacted at a greater level in an online course than in a traditional course in an attempt to “develop a greater sense of social presence by employing text based verbal immediacy behaviors to reduce the psychological distance amongst themselves” (p. 42). Some students are not engaged with the course and have been identified by both students and instructors as being potentially the greatest hindrance to the establishment of community. However, the instructor can compensate for this by providing direction and even
assist in decision making skills (Bliss & Lawrence, 2009; Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009). Wightin et al. (2008) also suggested that providing informal discussion forums may help students who are less motivated and desire more collaboration within their studies.

In order to develop community and critical thinking, students can also be utilized as facilitators within the course (Baran & Correia, 2009). By doing so, students take ownership of the task and feel a greater need for interaction. The study identified above found that even in these situations the instructor provided a model at the beginning of the course in which the other students followed. This concept is consistent with the Person-Centered Learning Theory in which the instructor allows the learner to explore various academic areas while serving as a guide in the process. Students become autonomous through this interaction and seek a greater level of collaboration (Jung, 2001). Therefore, the instructor provides a frame work of meaningful dialogue and can then be extended into further quality dialogue. Nagel et al. (2009) stated that, “Frequent, meaningful, valued, and dynamic discussions in an online course lead to the formation of a virtual learning community where students interact and support each other” (p. 39). The authors also warn that “lurkers” (Nagel, et al., 2009, p. 49) pose a threat to the discussion and formation of community, as it sets a pattern for other students to be isolated and observers-only.

The interaction that takes places within the course can either have negative or positive affects based upon the nature of that discussion. Wanstreet (2006) identified that the interaction that a student has with other learners, the instructor, and the course content increases overall involvement along with being a part of the community. Specifically, Xie et al. (2006) found that when there was less interaction overall within the course, students indicated they felt less motivation within the course. The authors concluded that when the instructor emphasizes
interaction, students are more purposeful about their communication which results in a greater sense of community. However, interaction was found to be more effective when it takes place within smaller groups in which there is a greater level of collaboration (Hans & Hill, 2007).

The connection between perceived learning, sense of community and interaction within the classroom, has been the focus of various research studies as it gives validity to the instructional methods which have been employed. Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007) found that there was a direct correlation between sense of community and perceived learning with the instructor’s interaction. The same study indicated that it was inconclusive whether instructor interaction is a greater influence upon perceived learning than the interaction with peers. In a study of satisfaction and perceived learning, Eom (2009) concluded that there is a positive correlation between student satisfaction and interaction with both classmates and the instructor which is not supported between perceived learning and instructor interaction. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that requiring students to put forth more effort will result in higher satisfaction after the task has been completed. This in turn results in a greater level of interaction in order to reach that goal.

The perceived knowledge that a student obtained in a course, particularly a theological course, can have a direct impact upon spiritual formation. Lowe (2010) found in a study of spiritual formation and its impact upon adult students that the more knowledge gained by a student, along with community and personal growth, resulted in the student being encouraged in their faith. This knowledge base becomes an essential component for connecting academic truth to spiritual truth. In an editorial of spiritual formation and Christian education, Bramer (2010) reflects that the principles which are taught must be put into practice through an exercise of faith. Namely, the principles which are taught must be engaged. Maddix and Estep (2010) do contend
that though material can be dissimilated with a level of interaction within community that an outside mentorship would be beneficial for putting the implications of the course into practice. The authors are supportive of online learning and believe that it is beneficial to spiritual development, but argue that spiritual formation should take place within the context of a community which has close proximity to the learner.

Yet, it is important to distinguish that higher instructor engagement results in higher understanding and thus implementation of the course material. Hill, Song, and West (2009) indicated that when the instructor has greater interaction and there is an expectation of higher quality within learner to learner interactions that perceived learning was directly affected. Beasley (2007) identified that instructor interaction has a significant correlation with the student’s perceived learning. Gerber et al. (2005) indicated that instructors need to be trained in the proper techniques to aid critical thinking and facilitate discussion. Even though students may establish a sense of community with their peers, their peers will not have the proper tools on their own to provide a structured framework to encourage dialogue. One of the instructor’s roles is to increase the level of dialogue which will then affect perceived learning. Students must be challenged to have a deeper level of discourse which can be done by providing critical feedback and giving direction (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Xie et al. (2006) stated that the instructor’s attitude towards the Discussion Board also contributed to the student’s overall feelings towards perceived learning. If the student saw online discussion as important, then they also saw a connection with the overall significance of the course (Xie et al., 2006).

Perceived learning was not always identified as having a direct correlation with sense of community. Ouzts (2006) found that even though students may indicate they learned from the course, they may indicate that they did not enjoy their interaction with the course, other learners,
and the instructor. When comparing traditional to online learning in Christian and public universities, Rovai et al. (2008) found that perceived learning may not be connected with sense of community. They also discovered that students felt a greater sense of community within the Christian schools regardless of delivery model. However, perceived learning indicated to be at the same level between Christian and public universities without regard to sense of community. Interestingly, Rovai and Barnum (2003) previously found that online courses had a lower correlation of significance to perceived learning than traditional courses. At the same time, the student’s overall feelings towards community can display a direct connection to their overall satisfaction with the course and learning (Ouzts, 2006). Therefore, this does not negate the need for community, but may suggest that the connection once perceived between community and learning may not be consistent.

The instructor’s role not only has an effect upon sense of community, but has an impact upon perceived learning. Menchaca and Bekele (2008) identified the vital role that instructors play within perceived learning, “Participants indicated that faculty did play a major role in organizing learning, providing feedback, and in monitoring the online process” (p. 248). Rovai and Barnum (2003) found that traditional courses were favored by some students as instructors were more interactive and gave stronger feedback. In relation to sense of community, they also indicated that students who were more active had a significant connection with perceived learning. However, the direct correlation between community and learning should not be quickly assumed as there seems to be other factors which influence the overall affect. Ni and Aust (2008) stated that the “sense of community might be a factor that contributes to immediacy, which then influences satisfaction and learning” (p. 491).
**Spiritual Development**

As other areas of development (social, cognitive, emotional, etc.), spiritual development must be intentional in its approach (Maddix & Estep, 2010; Rhea, 2011; Rothman, 2009; Seifert & Holman-Harmon, 2009), but is also broadly defined. Love and Talbot (2009, p. 617) found that as of 1999 there was only one article published that reported a direct relationship between the areas of spiritual development and student affairs. However, Olson (2011) concluded in his study of 278 adult online students at a Christian institution that the issue of spirituality was a vital area of importance for these students. Thus, it is appropriate to identify what is meant by the term “spiritual development” and to address whether one can be challenged in the area of spirituality outside the context of the traditional church setting, and identify how spiritual development takes place within the context of an online learning environment.

The term “spiritual development” is ambiguous in its definition and the implications in which it is used in relation to secular and non-secular institutions. Secular institutions relate the term heavily with one’s own personal spiritual quest, unrelated to any type of religious establishment (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011). One who is “spiritual” has a greater connection with intangible realities and may be more in touch with sensitivities towards humanity in general (Love & Talbot, 2009). Love and Gareth (2004) reported that spirituality existed prior to any form of organized religion, contrary to evangelical Christianity, and, in part, exists within the context of community. Astin et al. (2011) also argued that spirituality is often reflected outward through the practice of an organized religion; however, it is not dependent upon such action. The authors tended to focus on connecting one’s perception of the world within a spiritual dimension; thus, spirituality is limited to belief in another place of existence, not the growth within one’s own faith. Tisdell (2008) supported this viewpoint by noting that “. . . spirituality is about an
individual’s personal experience with the sacred, which can be experienced anywhere. Religion, on the other hand, is about an organized community of faith, with an official creed, and codes of regulatory behavior” (Tisdell, 2008, p.28). The author identifies that spirituality is thus related to finding one’s own being in the midst of conflict or life events.

A movement is even present to estrange spirituality even more from religion. Speck (2005), in a review of various definitions of spirituality, suggested that religion establishes intolerance and believes that if spirituality is to be taken seriously within academia then it needs to come to a basic outline which can be embraced by all ideologies. He is skeptical as to whether it can be done as the most basic tenants even invoke the supernatural. Gilley (2005), in his discussion of spirituality, favored a definition which emphasized the essence which causes an individual to be who he or she is and the appropriate choices that come out of that state of being. Estanek (2006) stated that it is difficult to establish a clear definition of the term as doing so infuses one’s own interpretation and belief of “spirituality.” Estanek (2006) concluded by stating that agreeing upon one’s definition of spirituality would be “unwise” (p. 278).

In contrast with a secular point of view in regard to spirituality, religious institutions have difficulty separating one’s spirituality from their religion. Fowler (2004) agreed that one’s faith has a direct influence upon the manner in which one conducts their life, but it is not to be separated from one’s expression of faith through organized religion. In a study of the experience of Protestant seminary students, Lincoln (2011) identified that the issue of spirituality relates to one’s own personal experience and the community. Therefore, as individuals will undoubtedly relate to society as a whole, it does bring into question whether spirituality can be separated from its practice. Martin (2008) identified that regardless of one’s religious beliefs, it is a “valorized decision” to believe that one can remain neutral on issues of religion and faith (p. 216). One’s
own personal beliefs will be exposed through their own personal worldview and, undoubtedly, will have an effect upon any intellectual discussion which is taking place within a learning environment.

From a Christian perspective, it seems that the terms of spirituality and religiosity are difficult to separate although they may have different implications in practice. In a study of various introductory undergraduate theology courses, Walvoord (2008) concluded that spirituality and religiosity are synonymous with the student’s desire for personal development and application of that development into their daily lives. Hindman (2002) connected spirituality with an active display of one’s faith and is an attribute which is present in each individual. Milacci (2006) stated that the use of the term “spirituality” is often empty and without meaning. His study questioned eight faculty members on the issue of spiritual development and concluded that the terms spirituality and religion are closely related to one another and often used interchangeably. Furthermore, spirituality and religion are related in the manner in which it is practiced. A third term, faith, was offered for use in hope that the term “increases the likelihood that substantive issues will be addressed” (Milacci, 2006, p. 231).

As stated previously, one of the central tenants of evangelical Christian institutions is its focus on cultivating an environment which focuses on both academic and spiritual development. Firmin and Gilson (2010) conducted a study in which they evaluated the mission statements of the evangelical institutions which were a member of the Coalition of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). In the study, it was found that while the missions statements utilized the word “education” 70% of the time, the term “Christian” was used 68% of the time (Firmin & Gilson, 2010, p.64). Furthermore, the term “academics” was surpassed by the terms “service”, “world”, and “life” which indicated that the focus of these institutions was to engage society with
their Christian faith. (Firmin & Gilson, 2010, p. 66). There is a clear inclusion of these terms in order to identify the institution with Christian ideology.

In order for these goals to be implemented, there must be a suitable learning environment which is conducive to fostering spiritual growth. Maddix (2010a) addressed whether the interaction within an online community can specifically facilitate spiritual development as it is not in the traditional context of a local body believers. He identified that the communion that we have in Christ as recorded in I Corinthians 10:16 is in a spiritual sense which does not require a physical dimension. It is the Holy Spirit which works in the life of believers to make us like Christ (Maddox, 2010a). It is also important to consider that the spiritual development which takes place within a residential setting is often void of the student’s having an active participation within a local church which is directly affiliated with the academic institution.

In contrast to a residential setting, which may employ campus pastors and have a robust spiritual life program to help facilitate spiritual development, course design of online programs should not conflict with the effectiveness of the instructor to engage in spiritual development (Maddix, 2010b). Shore (2007) indicated that though this may prove to be a challenge and awkward at first, that the same social presence can be expressed within an online environment. The author suggested that the instructor can speak about their experience in worship, cite a message or study they have been involved in, offer written prayers in class, or provide various forums to allow students to share experiences. All of these examples, may flow naturally within a residential setting (i.e. seeing an instructor return from chapel), but must be intentional within an online environment (Shoare, 2007).

The course content by itself is not enough to express the spiritual component of the course as students should be challenged to apply the spiritual truths which are being taught. An
instructor who is engaged is able to interact on a personal level. Hindman (2002) even highlighted the importance of instructors to be growing themselves in their faith. When the instructor lives out his or her faith, students are more likely to reflect upon their own spiritual development. Hindman (2002) identified that this development should take place within the environment of community which allows opportunity for “reflection and dialogue” along with opportunities to practice the areas in which they are being challenged (p. 176).

Not only does a social presence convey one’s expertise within matters that deal with spirituality, but the manner in which an individual ministers within the classroom can have a greater affect. White (2006) cited the Pauline Letters as a case study of how spiritual formation can take place at a distance. Citing twenty observations within the text, as supported by Zuck (1998), he identified the specific manner in which Paul engaged his audience in a real and personal relationship. Lowe (2010) suggested that online students have potential to be more connected to community than a residential student as face-to-face interactions do not equate an environment for spiritual development. A survey conducted by Lowe (2010) revealed that those within the course believed that their spiritual growth during the term had been affected by how they interacted with others within the online environment. Furthermore, Lowe’s study (2010) concluded that,

The study revealed that the following were consistent with presuppositions that spiritual formation occur in online courses: (a) enhanced spiritual formation as a result of increased knowledge, community development, and personal growth; (b) positively impacted spiritual development in light of peer and faculty relationships; and (c) assimilation of social and spiritual dimensions through course content and practical application. (Lowe, 2010, p. 4)
The author further identified that the instructor’s interaction is paramount as their study indicated that 40% percent of the comments received dealt with the positive role that the instructor played within spiritual development.

Within religious institutions, the interaction of the instructor is a vital part of fulfilling the university’s mission to create a faith community. Osborne (2011) in his study found that the interaction between both learners and instructors had a direct influence upon sense of community. Because interaction has a positive effect upon community and learning itself takes place within a social construct, courses need to be designed specifically to encourage interaction (Ouzts, 2006).

As spiritual development can take place within a community which is established outside of physical proximity, it is important to consider how spiritual development can be practically cultivated. Soul Projects, facilitated at Wheaton College, attempts to do exactly that as students in a theological course are encouraged to practice spiritual disciplines and record their results. Within community, they are able to share their private experiences and generate further reflection with classmates (Wilhoit et al., 2009). Though residential in format and focused upon religion students, the manner in which spiritual development takes part should be noted. Palka (2004) identified that “Theological education involves much more than the mere transfer of information, and seeks to establish a modeling/mentoring relationship that takes place within a theological community” (p. 38). Palka’s (2004) research of seminarians further reported that such activities as prayer and discussion of spiritual truths aided in spiritual development.

The classroom becomes the environment in which the acquired knowledge is turned into personal spiritual truth. This is highlighted by Lincoln’s (2011) study of protestant seminary students in which he noted that they identified the faculty and studying were more influential
than their own personal spiritual formation and worship. This seems to suggest that the manner in which they have grown in spiritual development is related to time spent in the classroom as it related the greatest influence to the traditional aspects of the course.

Spiritual development thus takes place when engaging spiritual truths in the present environment. Wilhoit et al. (2009) identified that it is the purposeful engagement of these spiritual disciplines within the current circumstance which gives way to spiritual maturity. Ma (2003) said that “mature Christian character involves integration and growth in all aspects of human development; the cognitive, affective, volitional, and spiritual domains” (p. 325). Morris et al. (2004) focused on the need of faculty to interact specifically within the realm of spiritual formation in order to connect the Christian worldview within the specific academic discipline, thus allowing one to grow within their faith as it is appropriately applied.

Interestingly, the focal point for learning, community, and spiritual development is the online Discussion Boards. Hines et al. (2009) reported that the ability to establish relationships in which individuals feel free to share their beliefs and offer constructive critiques is paramount for spiritual and academic learning. Furthermore, the study identified that within a case study at Trinity School for Ministry that instructor saw their interactions within the Discussion Boards as akin to discipleship models. The following methods were utilized by the instructor: “incisive questions, reflective listening, and effective direction” (Hines et al., 2009, p. 38). Maddix (2010b) noted that the online environment can “provide a context of untapped potential for Christian nurture” (p. 433).

An important consideration, while focusing on spiritual development, is that not all students may be open to an evaluation of their current beliefs. Martin (2008) concluded that it is important to both the academic and spiritual environment to create an atmosphere for students
where they do not feel pressured to conform to a specific mindset. There must be room for the student to disagree and provide responses which will not leave them vulnerable to attack or place them on the defensive. One method implored is requiring students to submit two questions per week on the course material. The author noted that through the course of the term, the dialogue often was raised to the next level. Martin (2008) identified that may even happen to such a degree that:

A student will put forth a question and then offer her or his own answer . . . . The student who has moved to this level of questioning and answering often displays the critical and self-reflective features characteristic of the more advanced stages of faith development (Martin, 2008, p. 220).

Whether the student is open to evaluation of their current beliefs and willing to grow in their spiritual development, the focus is to create an environment in which the student feels free to express their viewpoints without chastisement or fear of retaliation.

**Summary**

The importance of instructor interaction has been clearly documented through current research, primarily in relation to sense of community and perceived learning. The instructor plays a paramount role in bringing the objectives of the course together with its practical application. Various models and methods of instructor interaction have been reviewed in order to identify both the quantity and quality of interactions which should be present. Focusing on the construct of Social Constructivism, these interactions must take place in order for the said objectives of the course and the institution to be met. Methods, such as “Soul Projects,” have been enacted for the purpose of fostering spiritual growth. Similar literature identified the need of the instructor to have clear and specific engagement within the course not only to challenge
students, but to give a further insight into their own spiritual development in a mentor-like relationship.

Unique to this present study was the focus not upon the impact of instructor’s interaction or establishment of community in conjunction to the academic discipline, but rather upon the establishment and facilitation of spiritual development within an evangelical university. However, it cannot be forgotten that learning must take place within community and it is within this community that the needs of the students will be realized resulting in a positive experience (Dennen et al., 2007). The instructor plays a primary role not only to facilitate this community, but also learning in general. In the context of evangelical institutions, these two environments come together to foster spiritual development for it is the knowledge of the Christian faith and the practice within community which facilitates spiritual growth.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Current research supports the role of the instructor within the establishment of community and perceived learning. It is through the instructor’s interaction that an appropriate environment is created which fosters learning and the student’s overall satisfaction (Nagel et al., 2009; Nandi et al., 2012). Miller (2001) emphasized that it is the instructor which sets the mood for the community by establishing collaboration, being an available resource, and setting a high bar for critical thinking skills. Mechaca and Bekele (2008) emphasized the perception of students for the organizational role of instructors and the high expectation of critical feedback and engagement. By the instructor encouraging in-depth interaction with questions pertaining to one’s faith, they are not only fostering an environment which benefits academic growth, but spiritual development (Lowe, 2010; Maddix, 2010b; Ripley et al., 2009).

This study relates specifically to the role of the instructor with the establishment and the facilitation of spiritual development in an online environment. Specifically, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand instructor interaction in the establishment and facilitation of spiritual development within an online environment for undergraduate non-religion majors attending a distinctively evangelical university. The analysis of data collected sought to determine the various interactions utilized by instructors and provides a reflection of its effectiveness based on the student’s perception. As a qualitative study, this research will hopefully have served to provide a personal narrative of the type of interactions which are taking place, the role of community within the course, and the pursuit to fulfill the mission at a distinctly evangelical institution.
This chapter provides a description of the research design, the role of researcher, participants, setting, data collection procedures, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

**Research Design**

A qualitative case study was utilized to understand instructor interaction on the facilitation of spiritual development in an online environment for undergraduate non-religion majors attending a distinctively evangelical university. The case study purposefully sought to understand the instructor’s self-perception of the role, the actual interactions which took place, and the student’s perception of their experience within a course setting. It was assumed that a qualitative study should have provided a stronger analysis of the quality of interaction which took place in contrast to the quantity of interaction. Due to the difficulty of measuring spirituality as a result of its subjective nature, a qualitative case study should better afford the researcher to determine whether spiritual developments objectives for the course are being met for both the course and the institution. By evaluating both the course content and the instructor’s interaction, the role that the instructor plays could be better ascertained. As well, the question is not whether the student has made a major life changing decision, but whether they have questioned, or felt compelled to question, their current held beliefs in relation to a Christian worldview. The nature of the qualitative case study was exploratory as three courses were reviewed and for the purpose of establishing various avenues utilized by instructors for facilitating spiritual development. Upon identification of these techniques further areas of study have been identified for future research.

By observing three instructors, there was a greater opportunity to reflect upon the varying interactions present in the online learning community. Ruey (2010) constructed a case study
following two courses which utilized instructor interviews, student interviews, and online observations. While describing methodology, the author indicated that while the study was small there was a rich amount of information in which conclusions could be drawn. This provided an opportunity to observe whether these interactions are based upon course design or instructor interaction. Furthermore, it is possible for a section to create a community personality which is outside the influence of the instructor. Interaction may also be limited not by the instructor’s techniques, but their personalities. The following guiding questions were utilized within this study along with a description of how the instrumentation will be applied.

**Guiding Question 1: How, if at all, do instructors contribute to the spiritual development of students in an online course at a distinctively evangelical institution?** The instructor’s own perception of the importance of interaction and their role guided this study in its approach. An interview was conducted to allow the instructor to not only speak to specific methods utilized, but to provide a framework in which this was accomplished. In a similar manner utilized by Sites, Garzon, Milacci, and Boothe (2009), the instructor was asked a series of open-ended, rich questions which focused on their faith and the manner in which they attempted to facilitate spiritual development within the online classroom. The questions in this present study, however, were reflective of an online environment in contrast to a residential setting as developed by Sites et al. (2009).

In contrast to the phenomenological study conducted by Sites et al. (2009), this study utilized a case study approach to not only describe the instructor’s self-perception through observation of the course, but also to understand the online learning environment as it pertained to spiritual development. Therefore, areas in which the instructor did not identify as purposeful interactions were brought out as they contributed to the facilitation of spiritual development.
Systematically, upon identifying the perceived areas of effectiveness by the instructor, the course was reviewed to determine how in actuality this was carried out. Interactions via graded items and open forums were critical in understanding the manner in which they took place. Furthermore, areas such as general communication and tone employed, which may not be reflective within the instructor’s interview, were reviewed as it certainly contributes to the overall environment.

Guiding Question 2: What is the student’s perception of how instructor interaction challenges his or her spiritual development at a distinctively evangelical institution? Perception is not limited to the instructor, but included the overall impression of the student to the instructor’s attempt to foster spiritual development. It is perhaps the students’ perception which was the most important information to gather at this junction in the research. Do students believe that they are being challenged in their beliefs and whether it is a result of the instructor’s influence? A series of student interviews provided an opportunity to reflect upon the attempts of the instructor to foster an environment which was suitable for this growth. Namely, the student was asked about their own experience within the course and the role that the instructor played. These areas identified by the students were contrasted by both the experience of the instructor and the actual events which transpired.

Researcher’s Role

As an instructor who oversees other adjunct online faculty at the institution in which the study was being conducted, I have a clear understanding of the course design and the expected interactions of the instructors. Because of the wide differences within online learning (Rovai & Barnum, 2003), this knowledge provided opportunity for stronger analysis of the various types of interactions taking place as well as how instructors approach the online learning experience.
This has given me insight to discern whether these instructors who were selected were employing unique methods within the course they facilitate and whether they were effectively fulfilling their role as outlined by the administration.

A negative aspect is that I found myself being more critical of the various interactions if I perceived that the instructor could have taken further steps to have engaged the class, but failed to do so. This included weekly announcements not being in depth and failing to take the opportunity to connect course objectives with spiritual truth. It was possible, as well, that the feedback from the course survey may be read in a manner which favored the instructor and not the student based upon one’s own experience with student comments which are negative despite the strident actions of the instructor. For example, the students may have had a negative viewpoint of the course as a result of the student feeling that the instructor should have utilized fewer textbooks, of which the instructor has no control as this relates to course design. As a result, the analysis procedure has been verified by an outside source to minimize potential bias that may be read into the answers recorded.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were the instructors and corresponding students enrolled in three sections of a required introductory religion course for non-religion majors at an evangelical university in the summer of 2013. Instructors were selected based upon the screening on the “End of the Course” survey which was initiated by the University in order to gather feedback from the student about the course (Appendix A). I requested the “End of the Course” survey of instructors who facilitated the particular course during the previous two terms and were still active in the current term (Summer 2013). A total of 33 instructor’s “End of the Course” surveys were reviewed and assigned a rating on a ten-point scale based on overall impression. A high
ranking would include significant feedback (over 20% of the course) from students and comments that reflected positive contribution. Specifically, any statement which spoke to positive spiritual development. I was looking for positive comments that focused on how the instructor was an encouragement, engaged in class forums, or offered hope through Scripture. From this the top three instructors were contacted and invited to participate in this study. Two out of the three agreed to the study while one denied the request. I then contacted two more faculty members and both agreed to the study while the third participant was chosen based on being the first to respond. After a preliminary agreement to the study a formal consent form (Appendix B) was sent to the instructors. It is to be noted that the instructors contacted for this study were not under my direct supervision or known beyond a professional relationship. As well, instructors who are more noteworthy (i.e., publications, speaking engagements, recognizance) were not solicited.

One corresponding section for each of the instructors were chosen for this case study. The case study approach provides an in-depth looking into a particular setting which then resulted in a descriptive narrative. The study was limited to three instructors as selecting a greater number would result in greater breadth, but less depth. Furthermore, the study was not restricted to a single instructor in order to identify potential trends, techniques utilized, or influences caused by the instructor’s personality. Mahoney (1997) identified that there is no hard and fast rule within case studies for the amount of individual observations that should be made. The general principle outlined is to “avoid atypical situations, carry out observations more than one time, and (where possible and relevant) spread the observations out over time” (Mahoney, 1997, para. 13). This study characterizes those elements as it looked beyond a single occurrence and reviewed the entire set of online interactions.
In addition, the study consisted of those who were participating in an introductory religion course designed for non-religion majors. When selecting instructors for this study, this course criteria was one of the filters utilized in creating an initial participant pool. The selection of students contained a composite of students from various backgrounds and purposes for attending the university. This is in contrast to those who specifically sought a degree in religion for the purpose of spiritual development. As the objective of this study was to identify instructor interaction as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual development, it was pertinent to review multiple sections of the same course as student interactions varied and thus affected the learning environment. Thus, by doing so, reoccurring patterns were observed for further dialogue and research.

Based on enrollment management, each section should consist of 20 to 25 students. The total available participants within this study was 67 individuals. This includes three instructors and a total of 64 undergraduate students (Course A – 21; Course B – 24; Course C – 19). The number of students is indicative of those who are participated within the course and thus there was a level of interaction by the instructor. Of the possible 64 students, 29 students responded to the online survey (Course A – 10; Course B – 13; Course C – 6) and seven students completed the interview portion (Course A – 2; Course B – 3; Course C – 2). Randomized identification codes were utilized for each student which distinguished the course and the individual within the course. Course identification are simply listed as Course A, Course B, and Course C. Pseudonyms were given to the participants of this study as they took part in the interview process, dialogue within the course, student open ended survey, or any further communication within the course or via e-mail. The students themselves were not part of a targeted population beyond the general selection criteria of an introductory course. As the course was reviewed after
the interactions had taken place, the data is historical in nature. From this population, an email was sent out to request participation in an online survey and a potential follow-up interview in order to understand their perception of interaction within the course. Based on agreement to conduct this interview, students were contacted to complete a consent form (Appendix C) and schedule a time in which the interview could be conducted.

**Setting**

The site for this study was an accredited evangelical university which has a substantial online learning program, defined as being greater than 5,000 students. The site is clearly noted for its Christian faith and the integration of this faith within online learning. Online learning takes place through asynchronous technologies and the case study was solely evaluated through these technologies being the platform in which learning takes place and is indicative of the environment. The course evaluated is a required course for non-religion majors within the undergraduate program and listed as a three credit course. Online courses for this institution are eight weeks in length. This particular course could have been taken at any time within the student’s course load; however, the majority of students do complete this course as one of their first courses at the university.

Access to review the course and evaluate the various interactions was gained through online education management software, Blackboard®. There are three primary locations in which interaction can take place: student to instructor, student to course content, and student to student (Swan, 2002). Within the online environment, this can be grouped into various areas in which the student has access to these types of interactions. Students can engage with the course content through the individual modular which gives instructions and focuses on a specific unit which is being covered. Within the Discussion Board, students are able to engage with both the
instructor and students. The majority of interaction that are designed to take place is between students; however, the instructor interaction for purposes of this case study is noted. Students can also engage with the instructor through the grade book and via the institution’s e-mail network. Per department policy, the instructor is required to have a minimum level of interaction. This includes: posting a weekly announcement which outlines that module’s assignments and expectations; logging into the course every 48 hours to check for any potential student issues; responding to email correspondence within 48 hours; being interactive within the Discussion Board forums; and grading subjective assignments within seven days.

The institution was chosen in part due to the researcher’s security and permissions access as an instructor within the institution. This allowed greater access to the desired information, but at the same time did not cause a conflict of interest as no courses were chosen in which I had direct oversight. The selected school within the research site is under the supervision of the School of Religion which has affiliation with the university’s seminary. The School of Religion and its online studies fall under the purview of the Associate Dean. Under the Associate Dean are Administrative Chairs who oversee administrative duties and oversee various teams with faculty members. As well, each course is designed and maintained by a singular individual who is an expert within that individual subject area. The same course shell is duplicated for all sections within a given course. This design includes the same syllabus, schedule, assignments, and content. The instructor is not authorized to change the content and has been trained specifically to teach that particular course by the individual who has been designated to maintain the course. Any significant changes must be approved by the designated course manager. Beyond the course construction, the instructor had full responsibility and purview within the course. It is the instructor’s responsibility to serve as a facilitator of the course material.
Data Collection

Procedures

Approval for data collection was first sought through the formal submission of an IRB packet. As the study consists of the evaluation of a current program with minimal personal interaction within the setting and the interview process, an application was submitted for the Expedited Review. The focus of the study did not contain minors and was not seeking sensitive material concerning the students. The research conducted was for the purpose understanding interactions within an online course and did not solicit new learning techniques which may impede the learning process. After initiating the application process with IRB, formal approval was sought and granted by the Office of the Provost for the institution in which the study was conducted (Appendix D). Once this was received and appropriate measures identified by the IRB were completed, approval was granted (IRB Approval 1593.052813 under exemption category 46.101 (b)(4), see Appendix E).

Following clear written approval, the department was contacted to receive a copy of the course evaluation surveys in order to identify three potential instructors for this study. These instructors were noted for positive marks by the students and, especially, comments which notated positive student spiritual development as a result of interaction with the instructor. After potential candidates were selected, an inquiry for participation in the study was sent out (Appendix F) followed by a formal request for participation with the corresponding consent form. The study included an interview process in order to understand the instructor’s perception and the techniques utilized to foster spiritual development (Appendix G), review of the course interactions, and a corresponding open ended survey (Appendix H) and interview with students.
who were enrolled within the course. Each of the instructors taught only one section of the course within the given term the research was conducted.

The inquiry for the instructor’s participation was sent out during the seventh week of an eight week course. This sought to ensure that the participant was not affected in concern to the knowledge of the study and thus affect their approach for facilitating the course. As well, the instructor was not notified that their historical data of the course was being reviewed. Access to the course was gained through the administration. This manner of selection should not have had bearing on the findings of the study as it is based on historical data which has been provided by previous students. This as well, would have had no bearing on the current instructor’s interaction within the course or the current students. The instructors were notified that the purpose of the interview was to understand their perceptions and experience as related to online learning. This should not have affected the data collected as they were contacted toward the end of the course and there would not be a burden based upon their interactions which may have skewed the results based on a change of approach. The instructor may have been slightly more reflective of the various interactions which took place, but focus should not be as much that it affected their interaction in the final days of the course. After the transcription of the interview, a debriefing statement (Appendix I) was emailed to the instructors who participated in the study to inform them that the study specifically looked at instructor interaction as it related to spiritual development. The statement identifies that students were interviewed and the online class reviewed to help understand the interactions which took place.

The data collected from course interactions was historical in nature as the research focused on recently completed courses; therefore, there was not a need to gather permission to use the data from the course participants. The students’ personal information was not divulged
and focus instead was on student to instructor interactions. Pseudonyms were utilized when needed to report the interactions in a narrative fashion. The corresponding interviews with the instructor and students were conducted one to two weeks of when the final grade was submitted. A larger span of time following the conclusion of the course would have caused greater distance from the overall experience.

A significant portion of this study has been reliant upon an open ended interview with each of the participating instructors. An Interview Guide was constructed with general questions with several potential prompts within each question that helped to facilitate the discussion (Appendix G). Naturally, new questions and prompts developed while the interview took place to further glean techniques utilized, and overall perceptions or nuances to answers given.

Regarding student interviews, all students within the course were emailed to notify them of the current study and requesting their assistance in completing an open ended survey (Appendix H) with the opportunity to agree to participate in a follow-up interview. The email notification of the open end survey was submitted the Monday immediately following the course end date and reminder emails were sent during the two week period following the initial email which encouraged student participation. The rationale for this timeline was due to the course traditionally ending on a Friday, but instructors are given the flexibility to extend due dates into the weekend. The student was informed of the purpose of the study and how the interactions within the course which they completed were collected. It was through this notification that students were informed that all information recorded was confidential and that if any student would not like their information included within the study that they would need to simply email the researcher indicating so. No student submitted an email requesting that his or information be withheld.
Data was gathered by cataloging the interactions which took place on a weekly basis. This included logging the Discussion Board posts, grading feedback, and course announcements originated by the instructor. The Discussion Board posts focused specifically on the instructor’s feedback and any prompts given in concern to the assignment. This was then contrasted with the quality of the student interaction and reaction to the instructor’s interaction. Furthermore, the nature of interaction and its content was identified as it related to the Discussion Board. As feedback to assignments may have been repetitive due to the same assignment prompt, description of the instructor interaction was limited to the type of response with selective interactions being quoted as an example. Course announcements were reviewed to identify what makes up their correspondence with students. Graded feedback was also reviewed to focus on what areas that the instructor reflected upon within his notes to the student. This study then consisted of a formal survey and utilized a survey reporting tool which then generated a digital report with the associated findings. All data files have been password protected to ensure the privacy of the participants.

Methods

Spiritual development cannot be effectively determined at the end of an eight week program; however, steps were taken to determine the type of interaction which took place and the student’s perception of the type of interaction in conjunction with their current beliefs. A qualitative case study was the optimal tool for identifying these types of interactions and the manner in which they were perceived by: conducting an in depth interview with the instructors which evaluated techniques utilized to facilitate spiritual development along with their corresponding perceptions, evaluating the interactions which took place within the course, and considering student perceptions through an open ended survey. Two to three students from each
section, based on their agreement to participate, were contacted for a follow-up interview. The purpose of this interview was to gather further insight into the student’s experience within the online course. These interactions and perceptions were evaluated in light of the overall mission of the institution and course objectives along the instructor’s attempt to facilitate spiritual development.

The primary method of identifying the techniques utilized by the instructor was through the interview process. This allowed the researcher to understand the perspective that the instructor entered the online environment and the areas in which they believed that they can be effective in soliciting change within the student as it related to spiritual formation. The researcher began the interview process by following the interview protocol designed prior to the participant selection process. General questions were crafted along with corresponding prompts to help facilitate the discussion. These questions were developed in conjunction with an interview guide developed by Elizabeth Sites (2008) in her dissertation project titled, “Separate Threads or a Single Woven Piece? A Phenomenology of the Integration of Faith and Learning.” As well, the questions were based in part on models of spiritual development and related back to roles that instructors play in guiding students to growth (Hindman, 2002; Shore, 2007; Willett, 2010). The focus of the interview guide was to identify the instructor’s own perspectives as it related to spiritual development, the level of importance that they placed within their interactions in an online environment, and the specific methods utilized to reach these internalized goals and expectations.

A secondary method utilized to understand instructor interaction as it related to spiritual development is through student perception. Students were given an open ended survey consisting of seven items (Appendix H) identifying their perceptions of the instructor’s
interaction in general, in concern to spiritual development, and their own perception of spiritual
development. Interaction within this portion of the study was initially low, but after multiple
emails to solicit participation in the open ended survey the number of respondents increased.
Within the survey, students were given the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview.
The interview was largely reflective of the student’s responses within the open ended survey,
reflect upon their perceptions of whether the instructor purposefully attempted to facilitate
spiritual development, and their own reflections on the importance of personal spiritual growth
and maturity.

After the completion of the term and final grades turned in, an email was sent out from
the University’s email account to the student asking them to complete the open ended survey.
Taylor and Holley (2009) stated in their study of online degree programs as it related to Student
Affairs that it was appropriate to conduct the survey in an email fashion as students taking online
courses were accustomed to this method of data collection. The student’s information which was
collected was anonymous and was not relayed back to the instructor. Making the survey
anonymous allowed the students to feel more forthcoming in their responses and by waiting until
the final grades were submitted should have helped them feel more secure in having shared their
feelings. This also gave them opportune time to assess what they took away from the class in
concern to instruction and in questioning their own beliefs in concern to spirituality.

Whereas, the series of interviews with the instructors were conducted following the
closing of the course, student interviews were scheduled during the two weeks in which the
student had been notified to complete the open ended survey. The scheduled time for the follow
up interview with the student gave enough time for the completion of the open ended survey.
The interviews took place in the form of a phone call. Prior to the beginning of the interview of
students and instructors a consent form was collected, participants were thanked for their participation, reminded and gained permission that the interview would be audiotaped, and reminded that at any point during the process they were free to stop the interview. The duration of the call was based on the thoroughness of answers in response to the Interview Guide (Appendix G and J). Participants were notified that the expected time based on the amount of questions will be 30 minutes to one hour for instructors and 15 to 30 minutes for students. Both of these times frames proved to be appropriate in their assessment. Instructors had agreed to this interview at the beginning of the research project. Students were given the opportunity to agree to an interview when they complete their open ended survey. A small incentive of a gift card was offered for participation in this portion of the study for student interviews. Initial response was low, so with approval of the Committee Chair and the IRB, the incentive was increased to help facilitate participation. After the amount had been increased, a total of seven students agreed to take part in the interview portion (Course A – 2; Course B – 3; Course C – 2). All students who agreed to be interviewed were chosen regardless of demographics. The student interviews similarly followed an interview guide (Appendix J) which was open in format in order to ask a range of questions concerning the student’s experience. These questions corresponded with the guidelines created for the instructor interviews and provided further account of the information obtained through the open ended surveys. As well, students were asked the following in concern to their own personal faith: 1) How would you describe the importance of faith within your own life? 2) How would you describe the importance of faith within the classroom?

The study then systematically reviewed the various modes in which the interactions took place. The first mode of interaction was identified as graded feedback of assignments by the instructor. This included evaluation of subjective items, such as Discussion Board forums,
papers, and projects. These items allowed instructors to connect the stated goals of the course with spiritual truths. As well, any guidelines communicated in concern to objective or subjective assignments were reviewed (i.e., giving explanation to an answer from a quiz question, providing framework for a given project). This interaction between the instructor and the student has been restricted from other students as it is a private assessment.

The second mode of interaction included course interaction between the instructor and the student within the public viewing area. This included any type of course announcements or general emails in which the instructor initiated. The actual interaction which took place within the Discussion Board forums were evaluated as well as they were for the entire class and could have affected future interactions within the class as a whole. Notations were made if it was perceived that instructor interaction within the Discussion Board facilitated furthered conversation and reflection beyond course requirements. All instructor interactions with the Discussion Board forums were reviewed.

For the purposes of this study, the term “spiritual development” was utilized as the students who were engaged within the courses studied did not necessarily embrace the mission and worldview of the institution in which they have been attending. It is reasonable to presume that the “religion” or “faith” that the student held may be contrary to the official position of the university. As a result, identifying whether a student had been growing in their own “religion” or “faith” may be counter-intuitive if they have now questioned their own beliefs as a result of the expressed tenants of evangelical Christianity being taught. Faculty and students may be more apt to have identified positive growth within their “spiritual development”. The terms “faith” and “religion” were not used.
Data Analysis Procedures

Coding, Evaluation, and Interpretation

A case study approach has been employed within this study and provided the framework for data collection and analysis. By utilizing a case study approach, I was able to answer the questions of the why and the how of a current phenomenon that could not be readily answered or manipulated through other methods of study (Yin, 2003). The data collected during this research was primarily from participant interviews, open ended surveys, and through observation of course interactions. An observation protocol (Appendix K) was established in order to properly review the material gathered in a systematic manner. As a result, the methods utilized for collecting these two different data streams was dependent upon one another for the construction of the overall themes present within the instructor’s interaction in an online course.

The first data stream, the interview and open ended surveys compared and contrasted responses along their corresponding question from the interview guide and survey. Key words and phrasing were identified within their responses to look for reoccurring themes. As these themes emerged through the data analysis process, the corresponding research questions were highlighted to ensure that development of these themes coincides with the original intent of the research.

The second stream of data relates to the observation of instructor interaction within the online classroom. The data collected within this portion of the study utilized the Constant Comparison Method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) as general categories of interactions can be discerned based upon the role the instructor is known to take part of within the classroom. These areas include: a) completion of administrative duties and expectations as an instructor; b) sharing personal faith and personal growth; c) genuine expression of care for students, encouragement,
extension of grace; d) expressions of one living out their faith (prayer, Bible reading, service, church); and e) connecting academic truth with spiritual truth. The categories defined were based upon models of spiritual development and related back to the role that the instructor plays in guiding students to growth (Hindman, 2002; Shore, 2007; Willet, 2010). Further sub-themes were developed within these categories to identify specific nuances to how the instructor facilitated spiritual development. These categories and sub-themes were further refined and shaped by the results of the instructor interviews and contrasted with the instructor and student perceptions of the facilitation of spiritual development within the classrooms.

Interaction which pertained primarily to the subject matter and not related to spiritual development has been listed under the first category, “Completion of Administrative Duties and Expectations as an Instructor.” Interactions which took place span various categories and progress from one category to another as discussions continued. When these instances took place, notations were made identifying rationalize for the final categorization. The analysis of this material along with the instructor’s perspective served to answer the first guiding question: *How, if at all, do instructors describe their contribution to the spiritual development of students in an online course at a distinctively evangelical institution?*

Student perceptions will be reviewed separately to answer the second guiding question: *What is the students’ perception of how instructor interaction challenges his or her spiritual development at a distinctively evangelical institution?* The responses given have been categorized based on reoccurring descriptors written by the surveyed to describe their course experience. Various nodes were identified for reoccurring themes which were present within open ended surveys. The interactions of each of the sections were compared within the same instructor group. Then common themes of interaction were identified across the different
instructors. Instructor and student perceptions were cross-referenced according to actual interactions which took place to validate whether there was a connection between practice and intention.

**Justification of Analysis Methodology**

The analysis methodology utilized for this particular study utilized the case study approach for analysis. The data as a whole was analyzed and drew upon reoccurring themes which were present in the data as it emerged from collected data (Tellis, 1997). This was primarily seen through the interviews and open ended surveys with the participants of this study. The data was thoroughly combed through to identify specific practices, reflections, and reoccurring key themes by multiple readings of the interviews that resulted in coding of the subsequent observations. These instances were then transcribed into a table to chart reoccurring observations from which major and sub themes were drawn (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003).

The Constant Comparison Method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was also utilized for analysis of instructor interaction within the online learning environment. A set of broad categories related to spiritual development and instructor interaction can be established prior to the analysis of the data collected (Hindman, 2002; Shore, 2007; Willet, 2010). As per the method prescribed, the various categories were reconfigured to become more descriptive of the findings in relation to the instructor’s involvement and perception of spiritual development. This included the utilization of an observation protocol which took note of reoccurring events and their outcome as it related to the facilitation of spiritual development. Stake (1995) identified that observations from the case study should be viewed through a lens of time and activity. This provided a series of observations in which various themes were established and described. In addition, the establishment of subcategories provided this further refinement in order to underline the drawn
conclusions from the study.

The data produced from this study was obtained from a single course design with different instructors. Stake (1995) identified this type of case study approach as a Collective Study. Though case studies often focus on an individual event it may be appropriate at times to look at multiple occurrences (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Yin (2003) identified that this may be appropriate in order to identify recurring results from a similar environment or potentially predictable differences. As the format of this study utilized the same course design, yet is facilitated by differing instructors, this has been a prime application of a Collective Study. This could include varying results based on the instructor’s engagement or by class participation. As a result, themes of various types of interaction have been identified which can be transferred to like courses. The differences namely reside in the setting of the study being a religion course; however, this is in tune with the purpose and objectives of an evangelical institution. The findings from this case study can be transferred to similar courses at evangelical universities and colleges to fulfill said institutional objectives.

Utilizing a qualitative case study allowed a more intimate viewpoint of the various interactions which took place and their corresponding results. Providing an open ended survey gave further insight into the perceptions of the students which can be easily expressed within course interaction. The interviews provided not only a reflection on the students and instructors interactions, but whether they perceived that an environment was created which fostered spiritual development. As an instructor who oversees other adjunct online faculty, my understanding of the online learning environment, including the instructor’s potential role, has been beneficial within the case study approach as it provides for areas of further research (Stake, 1995).
Trustworthiness

The credibility of the study has been dependent upon the method data is collected, preserved, and ultimately interpreted. For this study, trustworthiness has been established through detailed analysis of events, member checks, triangulation of data, and peer review. Creswell (2007) identified that detailed analysis is an appropriate manner in which to establish trustworthiness in a study as the rich detail can be transferable to other studies. Thus, clear differences in future studies can be noted and potential differences in a study can be extrapolated. In this study, particular detail was given to the recording of all interactions and correspondence between the instructor and students. By nature of the type of online instruction, all interactions were recorded and time stamped through Blackboard®. As the researcher, this information was preserved and provided a clear understanding of the structure in which these interactions took place. Also, student feedback was primarily in written form with follow-up interviews being recorded for accurateness. Likewise, the instructor interviews were recorded and a transcript of the interview was provided as a form of member check. No comments were made by the instructors in concern to the transcript of the interviews.

Furthermore, the data collected came from various sources. Information was collected from instructor interviews, student feedback, and from observation of the online learning environment. These sources of information provided triangulation of the actual events which transpired online and thus established trustworthiness. Specifically, the perceptions identified by both instructor and students were cross-referenced to what actually took place online. Studying the same course, facilitated by three different instructors during three different sections provided an opportunity to identify reoccurring themes of interactions and types of behavior which solicited a common response. Limiting the study to one instructor would have decreased the
transferability of the results as the interactions may be a result of the instructor’s personality, strong cohesion of that particular group of students, or by circumstance. The constant within the environment was the course design that had the same assignments and expectations as outlined in the course syllabus. Multiple sections increased dependability of the study (Jarrell, 2009).

In concern to trustworthiness within the analysis, there was a peer review of the process by which themes and sub-themes were concluded from the collected data. Peer selection for this analysis had no connection to the study and no intentional bias to the findings of the study. This helped remove my own potential bias as being connected to the department and as an instructor. In addition, the established themes were based on participants’ perceptions and the overall online experience. Though there may be categories initially established for the purpose of recording data, they were not restrictive for the development of themes and sub-themes.

**Ethical Issues**

During the course of the research study, all attempts were made to secure the student’s confidentiality and ensure that the findings recorded were consistent with the events of the course. Confidentiality of the students has been protected by identifying their interactions with a randomly generated number. This number was kept connected with the name while making observations during the term and then was discarded after all information had been compiled and categorized. The student identification key was kept on the researcher’s home computer and was encrypted with a unique password.

The instructors were given a copy of the recorded observation to check for accuracy. The coding process and data analysis were reviewed by a third party to ensure that the conclusions were consistent with the observations which were made. While conducting this study, the researcher negated bias by soliciting peer evaluation to determine whether the conclusions are
consistent and valid. Specifically, peer evaluation focused on whether conclusions were too critical in concern to purposeful interaction in relation to spiritual development. Because serving as an ordained minister may have given a more critical viewpoint of what type of interaction should have took place, this evaluation helped to put the interactions within proper perspective.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the various attempts by the instructor within the online learning environment to facilitate spiritual development. The research questions which guided this case study focused on the instructor’s perception and the events which took place within the classroom while comparing with the student’s perception of these same interactions. The findings provide an analysis of the participants in how they view the role of spirituality within an online course and identify themes related to the facilitation of spiritual development.

Participant Background

A brief review of the participants within this study has been provided in Table 1. As the focus of this study pertained to the facilitation of spiritual development, it is important to first understand the instructor’s perception of their professional role, the student’s perception of the institution in which they have chose to study, and the perception of both parties as it relates to the openness of spiritual development in general. Table 1 contains background information for each of the corresponding instructors and the number of respondents from the corresponding sections. Pseudonyms were established to protect the identity of the participants.
Table 1

Instructor Background and Course Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Dr. Jones</th>
<th>Dr. Smith</th>
<th>Dr. Williams</th>
</tr>
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<td>D.Min.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Interviews Completed</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Instructor Perception of Professional Role

During the course of the interview, all three of the instructors spoke highly of their professional role, experience at the institution, and their relationship with their colleagues. All of the instructors as well completed course work as students at the same institution in which they are now employed. It was not surprising then that the instructors knew word for word the mission statement of the institution and incorporated it into their own personal instructional goals. Dr. Jones stated:

We are working not just for the student’s education, but helping them become the kind of people and develop the kind of worldview that will make them successful. And of course, all of us would think that is the Christian worldview centered on Christ.

Dr. Smith furthered this theme by stating that he not only sought to impart a Christian worldview, but sought to help others become better students of God’s Word. Dr. Jones even
identified that it was through his professors who “ignited a passion in me for studying Scripture and then turn around and make it more easily understood by students or people in the Church” as a cause to pursue his doctorate so that he could likewise impact students on a spiritual level.

When speaking of the role that instructors have within spiritual development in an online learning environment, all of the instructors agreed that the instructors plays a significant role as they set the overall receptivity for the spiritual truths which are to be gleaned. Failure to set this tone could cause the students to be closed to any attempt to speak about issues related to spiritual development. Dr. Jones identified that the tone for the course should be set early, including the opening announcement and early interactions. He stated that he tries to empathize with students by understanding the busyness of their lives and hopes that they see this course as an opportunity to learn about God. Dr. Jones expressed that one of the roles of the instructor is to prepare students for spiritual growth.

**Student Perception of the Institution**

During the open ended survey portion of the study, 23 out of 29 students indicated that a significant factor for choosing this institution was due to its Christian foundation and worldview. Six students identified that this was not a factor and one student, John indicated that he did not even know that it was a Christian institution. John did indicate that it would have been “an extreme determining factor” had he known the strong focus placed on the Christian worldview and he would not have attended the school. The students who took part in the interview portion of the study gave further reflection upon the issue of faith within their personal lives and in regards to higher education. All of the students interviewed indicated that faith was of importance to them, though Linda, from Course B, indicated that for her, the issue of faith was not a priority before attending this institution. She expressed that through her time at this school
she has been more involved and has encouraged her friends in conversations revolving around faith. Four out of the seven students indicated that the issue of faith was a factor when choosing this school to continue their education.

**Openness to Spiritual Development**

It is important to consider both the instructor and the student’s openness to spiritual development within the classroom as it provides a framework in which all others interactions take place and the receptivity toward those interactions. The instructors within this study clearly expressed that their role was not just academic. The instructors recognized the unique ministry opportunity that they had with students from various backgrounds. Dr. Smith stated that he enjoyed his job and followed by stating, “I don’t even call it a job, it’s a ministry.” Dr. Williams indicated that his position was a calling of God and needed to maintain the spirit of Christ-likeness. He stated that he “see[s] the student not as a paycheck, but as a ministry opportunity.”

All of the instructors saw their ministry as one of encouragement, caring for students, and planting seeds. Dr. Williams stated that he not only wanted them to do well academically, but to ultimately make a difference for the Kingdom of God.

Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams serve in a full time ministry capacity outside of their responsibilities within the institution. Dr. Williams, serving almost 30 years in full time ministry, identified that he was called foremost to minister; therefore, as a result, his interactions seek to cultivate that climate. Dr. Jones stated clearly that he believed that instructors have a responsibility to facilitate the atmosphere conducive to spiritual growth. Dr. Smith emphasized that the course needed to focus on a clear representation of Christ and a clear presentation of the Gospel – that is the instructor’s responsibility.
However, all of the instructors identified that the individuals coming to the institution may not be believers. Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams spoke of only a few situations where they felt students were not open to spiritual development. Dr. Jones expressed little sympathy to this regard as he believed that students came to the institution knowing that it is an evangelical institution. When asked about whether students were challenged in the course to evaluate their spiritual beliefs, all three of the instructors responded that there is a possibility that the students could be challenged. Dr. Jones stated that they would be encouraged in their faith if they completed the course the way it was designed. However, he believed if they did not, that was not necessary a reflection on their relationship with Christ, but they also wouldn’t be challenged through the course.

Dr. Smith concluded that there must be a Christian worldview and Gospel communicated within all the courses in the institution. Dr. Smith explained that this encouragement of students’ faith was accomplished through announcements, email, personal devotion and by challenging them through their assignments. He believes that the instructor’s role is to help equip students in the understanding of God’s Word and to help them better express themselves. In addition, Dr. Smith holds a high regard for the course content. He believed that is primarily through the course content that a student is encouraged in their faith. He expressed doubt of how a student could fail the course and still be challenged in their faith.

Though the instructors from this study saw themselves as ministers, they did not indicate the same awareness to the openness issue of spirituality within the students as the students themselves indicated. When asked about the role that “growing spiritually” should play while completing their degree, 26 out of 29 students responded that either they had an active desire to
grow in their faith or they believed that spiritual growth in general is an important component within their lives. Charlie, from Course C, indicated this by stating:

“Honestly, it is the sole reason for me choosing [this school] . . . when I chose to return to school I based it upon my desire to take classes that I wanted to grow in and [this school] offers classes that I want to learn more about.”

The instructors indicated during their interview that they believed there was a genuine openness of students to speaking of spiritual matters; based on student responses this would seem accurate. The students gave the impression that there was more than just a desire to speak to spiritual matters as they were open to growing in their faith through the course. Three students did not affirm openness to spiritual maturity. One stated that they did not feel like it needed to play a role, but they were enjoying their experience. One student, who did not realize this institution was a Christian school, felt that faith and education should be separate.

Of the students interviewed, all of them expressed openness to the overall experience of faith within the classroom. However, there were varying degrees on how the issue of faith is applied. For example, Tony saw the issue of faith related more to his own personal integrity and habits in relation to studying. Caleb expressed enthusiasm about the integration of faith within the different courses offered at the school. He stated:

“. . . so when I get to go take a class, be a business class or a math class, [when faith is included] into the subject matter, it automatically gets me interested and more involved in learning the material because Jesus is the most important thing in my life. So, I’m glad that it’s a part of the learning curriculum.”

Bart, in contrast, focused on how these interactions help him feel more part of the community. He stated:
“People pray for you and you can be encouraged and . . . it’s just almost kind of another driving factor. Like all these people are going through similar situations or they have their own situations and we are all sharing the same faith going through the same course.”

Though students may approach the issue of faith within the classrooms for different reasons, there is a general sense of openness to the inclusion of faith within the classroom.

**Themes**

Based on the data collected, three themes emerged which revealed how instructor interaction helped to facilitate spiritual development in an online religion course. The themes presented themselves through the instructor interviews and through observation of course interactions. Then these themes were compared with the overall perception of the students within the course as they provided feedback within the open-ended survey and personal interviews. The following themes are related to the primary purpose of the study and to the research questions:

1. Instructor Encouragement
2. Instructor Empathy
3. Instructor Engagement

Each of the themes identified will look first at the instructor’s perception along with course interaction and then will review the student’s perception of the same related theme.

**Instructor Encouragement**

**Instructor perception and course interaction as related to instructor encouragement.** A consistent theme found among all of the instructors was the importance of being an encouragement to the students and to understand their current situation. All other interactions come based from this mindset. Dr. Jones found that the most reoccurring comments
about his course related to the subject of encouragement. He hypothesized that this was the result of the student trying to meet the instructor’s expectations and then feeling successful when the instructor showed a measure of encouragement in response to the student. Dr. Jones understood that encouragement in and of itself does not cause spiritual growth, but “maybe improves spiritual development in an indirect way.” Dr. Jones believed that fostering an environment which is encouraging gave an opportunity for students to be receptive to course announcements, graded feedback, and comments related to spiritual aspects.

Encouragement and care within the course began with the instructor’s overall tone in communication with the students. Each instructor consistently communicated words of encouragement and blessing. Dr. Smith would always open his announcements with calling the students “Friends” and closing his announcements with “Shalom.” Dr. Jones reminded students regularly that he was available and encouraged them to contact him if they had any questions. Dr. Williams made the environment more comfortable by feeling free to use emoticons during the moments when he had to remind students of a requirement.

There was the same level of care and concern for the student shown in feedback to subjective assignments. Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith would identify the students by name within their grading. Dr. Smith told his students that within their Discussion Board replies they were expected to address their classmates by name. Dr. Williams encouraged his students to have positive interactions with their classmates and to encourage each other. Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams comments to students were laced with encouragement. For example:

Dr. Jones: “Johnny, You did a great job with the post this week. I really appreciate the thought and effort that you put into addressing the topic. Keep up the great work! I look forward to reading your future posts”
Dr. Williams: “Thank you for your Discussion Board thread on Prophecy. I appreciate your thoughtful analysis and think you did a good job summarizing the key aspects of this genre. Good work.”

Within projects Dr. Jones cautioned that it is important to point out the positives that the student did and encourage them to do better in future assignments. Dr. Smith, continuing with the importance of Discussion Boards, believed that this was the place which could damage the ability to communicate with students. He stated that if somebody brings up “bad doctrine” or a lousy attitude, it is the responsibility of the instructor to bring it into check or else it could get out of control. He expressed that a positive environment for learning needs to be in place.

Encouragement was not just limited to graded comments, but also included their weekly announcements. Dr. Williams made it a practice to thank students who had improved in their overall course work since the beginning of the term. At the end of the term, he also expressed his gratitude for being given the opportunity to instruct students and thanked them for the interactions they had with one another. He stated, “It has truly been a pleasure to be your professor for this course. You have each shown Christ-like character and kindness in all of your interaction with each other, as well as to me.”

**Student perception of instructor encouragement.** There was a clear recognition by students of the encouragement that their instructors had given them throughout the course. Students within Dr. Smith’s course indicated that they were comfortable with the discussion that related to spiritual matters because of the encouragement the instructor provided, his knowledge of God’s Word, and from the instructor’s relationship with God. Esther stated that she felt comfortable “because I believe [Dr. Smith] really read my Discussion Board and understood me.” In Dr. Williams’ course, the students noted the positive feedback that he gave and how he
asked students to encourage one another. Doug stated, “[Dr. Williams] always had positive feedback even when there were corrections, his focus was always on positive motivation.”

Dr. Smith provided the most in-depth comments to subjective assignments in relation to the other instructors and received a large number of positive comments about his interactions. Nate stated, “I was encouraged by [Dr. Smith’s] words of encouragement like, pray for your classmates, pray for yourself, we can pull this, we can do this, things like that.” Nate continued by expressing that in a Christian university, the “professors should be engaged with encouraging . . . .” Linda noted that she was lifted up by the Dr. Smith’s actions, such as: letting them know that he was praying for them, the use of Scriptures, and encouraging students to be friends. She indicated that mid-week, Dr. Smith would often send out an encouraging line or tool that was helpful.

When asked about the role that the instructor should play, Dr. Smith’s students were positive and reflective of what he had already done within the course. Linda said she was expecting the instructor to be a “mentor, guiding hand, affirming hand to explain things . . . I felt that my instructor personally exceeded that expectations I had for him.” She indicated that he was helpful, encouraging, fast, accurate, and available. She expressed that “[Dr. Smith] was above and beyond to really make sure his students were happy and healthy spiritually . . . .” Abigail felt that the instructor should foster conversations about faith and be available to the students.

Bart, from Dr. William’s course, indicated that the instructor should lead by example. He stated that he felt Dr. Williams had a “really good Christian attitude” and that when instructors show themselves to be impersonal, it creates a negative environment. Bart expressed that Dr. Williams was “very adamant about always encouraging and giving you words of hope and little
words of wisdom now and then.” Bart indicated that it felt like Dr. Williams was making a point to be encouraging within his emails. This interaction was evident as Dr. Williams told the students that he was praying for them and that they would grow in their relationship with God. He would encourage students to be positive and edifying in the Discussion Board forums. He left encouraging comments within the grading of all assignments. Dr. Williams and Dr. Jones had standard comments for Discussion Board grades that would always include encouraging comments to students about their work.

Students within Dr. Jones course indicated that he had an impact upon their own spiritual growth by providing encouragement throughout the course, specifically within his weekly announcements. All of the students mentioned the weekly announcements as a way the instructor reached out. Zack stated, “The instructor was able to share his faith through supporting the curriculum and behaving in a relatable way.” Anne noted that the instructor was available if they had any questions about their work. The students noted a general tone of care and that he was invested in their learning experience. Numerous students indicated that Dr. Smith was encouraging through his personal devotions and in encouraging students to pray for one another.

**Instructor Empathy**

**Instructor perception and course interaction as related to instructor empathy.** A common theme expressed among the instructors is the need to show grace and understanding to students. Dr. Williams reiterated his role of ministering to students by stating that instructors should see themselves first as children of God and then servants. Dr. Smith, taking a more academic tone, stated that the role of the instructor was imparting a worldview, but within that there is a need to show compassion and willingness to help students. He indicated that both of these elements cause the student to be more open to efforts of communication. He gave as an
example of when a student unexpectedly experiences loss or trouble and by stating “. . . that is where our worldview comes in. There is compassion.” Dr. Williams felt that when students are shown kindness and the love of Christ, their response is typically positive. Furthermore, Dr. Williams related the issue to that of preaching: “The same thing within the Church, I preach to the congregation I am imparting the truth of God through them as I preach the Word of God, but if I don’t care about the person in the pew, I will not accomplish much.” It is within this framework and perception of spiritual development that all of the interactions from the three instructors flow.

When asked of any areas in which they perceive damaged spiritual development, the responses related more to how the instructors respond to the student verses any action in which they initiate. Dr. Jones believed that if the instructor was inflexible of extenuating circumstances, it could cause the student to be closed to any attempts to minister to them. Dr. Williams felt strongly that being respectful of a student’s time and effort is important and is a “common courtesy” and that being slow in administrative and grading responsibilities may damage the environment for spiritual development and that failure to be attentive “sets up a barrier between the student and the professor that really doesn’t need to be there.”

Dr. Williams believes, based on the student feedback that he has personally received, that it is the instructors and their care for the students that set this institution apart. Specifically, it is the care and concern shown by the instructors as representatives of the institution. Within the theme of “Instructor Empathy” there are specific areas that were noticed within the instructor’s interactions that need to be further explored. These areas include: Care for students as individuals; empathize with student’s status; providing help for success; and encouraging students in their faith.
Care for students as individuals. During the course of the instructor interviews, they continued to emphasize the importance of caring for their students as individuals. As previously stated, one of the ways in which this was communicated by the continual addressing of students in all correspondence by name. Another avenue of care was to use those moments when life circumstances come up to minister to the students in a personal manner. Dr. Williams stated that he saw his interaction through email as a type of ministry and an opportunity to show God’s grace. When students ask for an extension due to an unforeseen life circumstance, he grants an extension and then spends the next portion of the email trying to minister to them as an individual.

Likewise, Dr. Smith focused on the importance of expressing that he cares personally for the student and so does the institution. If a student indicates that they are going through a difficult life issue, he writes out a prayer, uses encouraging words, or provides Scripture. Dr. Williams identified that some of the most fulfilling times are praying for a student over the phone when they are going through a difficult time. He then gave an example of a student from a previous term that called stating that they needed an extension as her son was just arrested. He used this as an opportunity to speak to the student’s need and she simply broke down and began to cry. He stated that he was there to let her know that “we care as an institution, and that I care as a professor, that God cares for her more importantly.”

Opportunities to minister to students are not just related to extenuating circumstances. Dr. Williams identified that he remembers working with an older gentleman who had not been in school for a long time and this was his first online course. Dr. Williams spent numerous times over the phone with him working over the papers, giving feedback, and just encouraging him. Dr. Smith emphasized the need for students simply to know affirmation in their lives. He stated,
“People are dying for affirmation, for hope, for encouragement, and I can give a few words . . .” Dr. Smith stated that he looks for opportunities to include prayer, be available, and provide the Gospel message to the students.

During the interview, Dr. Smith, apart from the other instructors, addressed that one of the areas in which he felt concern for students was related to the ambiguous nature of education and varying expectations. He stated plainly:

 Sometimes the education business is like a game. You try to figure what I want from you—that’s baloney! Both you and I have had teachers that should be doing something else. So I try to be professional. I try to understand that if someone messes up that bad, there’s a cause . . . our instruction . . . something that causes that. So I try to find it and give them a second chance.

Dr. Smith continued by stating that his focus is on teaching mastery of the subject. If he is able to help the students understand the material by having them take another opportunity, then he believes that is best for their education. He recognizes that there is a need to work with students who are struggling.

**Empathize with student’s status.** From the beginning of the research, the instructors expressed that the responsibilities and busyness of life for the online student was drastically different than the traditional, residential experience. Dr. Smith identified that students may be in the military, have family responsibilities, involved in various ministries, and even understand that some students may simply be taking courses in order to open future doors. In fact, Caleb, from Course C, identified that the only reason that he went back to school was due to lacking the educational credentials to receive a promotion despite his rich amount of experience. Dr. Smith stated that the time element is “a tough part that I have to deal with because I am touching the
Holy Grail there.” He said it took him a while, but he realizes that he is “dead last in the priority list.” As a result, he stated that the students do not need a professor who is overly critical and not engaged.

Dr. Smith identified that he sees himself as the lowest priority in a student’s life. Though there was clear expectation for students to complete their assignments in a timely and thorough matter, there was also the tone that the instructors understood what the students were going through and wanted to come alongside them during this educational experience. Dr. Williams stated during the first week the following: “Okay . . . ; that is enough for now . . . you have enough reading to do without me writing another book for you :-(.”

Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith encouraged students by speaking about the course being designed for students like them. Dr. Jones encouraged the students by letting them know that he understands their lives are busy, but he believes they can be successful with proper time management. He stated:

“I realize that many of you are already feeling overwhelmed by your load of classes and the amount of work that needs to be completed in the next eight weeks. Don’t worry; you will all get through it if you manage your time well. The course is designed for students like you who are taking other courses, working, and involved in church and family activities. But [strong emphasis] . . . this all depends on your ability to manage your time well and consistently work your way through the weekly reading.”

Likewise, Dr. Jones stated in his closing announcement to the course the following:

“Thank you all for the effort you have put into our course over the past eight weeks. I know that it is often difficult to keep up with a class of this format while balancing all of the responsibilities of jobs, families, and ministries. You are to be commended for
pursuing an education in the midst of your busy lives, regardless of your final grade in
the course.”

These expressions communicate to the students that the instructors understand their current
situation. This was expressed by the instructor through their constant affirmation of the student.

Regularly, the instructors would give positive feedback and encouragement to students
for the work they had completed. Often, the words focused on their “effort” and “thoughtfulness”
while being quick to say “Thank you” for their work. Dr. Smith would often end his comments
to the first project submission by stating “I appreciate you and your fine work!” Dr. Jones
encouraged the students during the final week by stating: “Thank you all for your hard work up
to this point.” These words not only express care for them as individuals, but recognize the work
they have put into the course.

**Providing help for success.** A common reminder from the instructors was for the
students to reach out to them if they needed assistance. From the very beginning of the course,
Dr. Smith encouraged students by stating: “Remember that I am here for you and your emails
and calls are not interruptions or bothersome to me. I want you to learn wondrous things from the
Word (Psa. 119:1).” The call by Dr. Jones for students to contact him for questions was repeated
weekly. Dr. Williams not only addressed his openness for students to contact him, but also
touched on the resources given to do so: “Last thing . . . if you are a new student at [this
institution] ‘welcome aboard.’ Do not be shy about asking what may seem like silly questions.
That goes for everyone. :-) AND PLEASE KEEP UP WITH THESE WEEKLY MEMOS :-) They really do answer questions.”

Each of the instructors provided help with not only being a resource for students, but
constructed their communication in such a way that they clearly explained what was expected
from the student. All three instructors looked ahead to the course projects prior to the week in which the assignment was due and spoke about expectations. Expectations for the Discussion Boards were emphasized a week ahead of their due date. Dr. Smith also provided a recap in which he reminded the students what to be working on for the next assignment. Interactions with fellow classmates were emphasized. Minimum word counts were clearly communicated. Students were reminded of the importance of integrity within their work and avoiding plagiarism within all assignments.

Each week the assignments due for that modular and the readings were clearly outlined. Though Dr. Jones did not provide the exact reading assignments as Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams did, he connected with the academic material by bringing practical matters to light. As well, Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams provided study tips that corresponded with the weekly quiz. A clear line of communication was established with the student in order to help them clearly understand what was expected of them and to do well in the course. Within the grading of assignments, when points were deducted there was always clear communication of why points were deducted and encouragement for how the student will do during the next assignment.

There was consistent grace that was given throughout the term. This was most evidently seen through the interactions of Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams. Dr. Williams encouraged students that he was willing to accept late work by stating: “I will still allow you to complete all of those, with minimal penalties for being late. Remember that to turn in something is always better than to turn in nothing.” Dr. Jones likewise reached out to students within the grading comments if they had not completed the assignment. He stated: “I am concerned that you have not submitted this assignment yet. I want you to succeed in this class, which means you will need to complete each assignment on time. Please send me an email about making up this assignment.” Dr. Smith
also expressed this attitude of grace as he told students during the first week that if they had not received their textbooks, do not worry as he will work with them. As well, all three instructors showed grace by giving students an extension on the course’s final deadline from Friday until the end of the weekend.

**Encouraging students in their faith.** As these various categories often overlap, the encouragement of students within their faith not only communicates the need for spiritual development, but a care and compassion for an individual’s spiritual state. This was most clearly expressed through the weekly announcements of Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith. Each week, they made an attempt to either connect the weekly content with challenging questions or provide a devotional thought to spur the student to consider deeper matters pertaining to the faith. Dr. Jones, for example, asked students to consider the testimony of John’s Gospel and previously asked if they were prepared for Christ’s return. Dr. Smith provided 2 Timothy 2:15 as an encouragement to students and challenged them in their study to use the experience within the course to understand God’s Word on a deeper level.

As well, all of the instructors throughout the course told students that they were praying for them. Dr. Jones often concluded his reflections on the week’s reading with addressing a charge for the students and stating that he is praying in concern to that particular topic. This expresses that he has a personal interest for them and not just knowledge that comes from the course material. Dr. Williams began the course by stating, “It is my prayer that as you journey through this course, you will gain a greater passion for God’s Word as well as a greater passion for Him.” Dr. Smith also expressed that he cares about the student’s spiritual growth: “I will be lifting you all up in prayer to the end that we might echo the words of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: Did not our hearts burn within us while He was speaking to us on the way?
(Luke 24:32).” These prayers are not hollow expressions as the entire demeanor of the instructor’s interaction was filled with care for the student and their experience in the course as a whole.

**Student perception of instructor empathy.** Students were aware of the grace and care that was demonstrated by the instructors. As a result, these interactions allowed an opportunity for greater contact and communication between the instructor and the students. The students within Dr. Jones’ course, with the exception of one, reported they felt a level of comfort and care from the instructor of the course. Andrew noted that he felt comfortable because Dr. Jones was both friendly and accepting in his approach. Bart felt that through his interactions that it was easy to contact Dr. Jones and that he provided assistance when he was late with an assignment. Susan felt when she missed an assignment that Dr. Smith used the situation to share his faith. She stated that Dr. Smith didn’t communicate to her that she was going to fail, but instead asked what he could do to help.

Tony stated that he felt Dr. Jones made a “good effort in sending out emails with verses, devotional to try to encourage students…” Tony believes at these moments when issues arise in the classroom, the instructors can show the love of Christ and make a difference within the course interactions. Tony believes that when instructors do not show “the love of Christ,” it “communicates a lack of them really caring about the student’s development.” Furthermore, he said, “If they already help them through a crisis or understood the problem that they would be more likely to listen because, I feel like, a little bit of a basis for a relationship there.” The two students interviewed from Dr. Jones’ course, both expressed that they had some sort of technical issue in the course and felt that Dr. Jones was very professional and responsive in handling the situation.
Instructor Engagement

Instructor perception and course interaction as related to instructor engagement.

Through the instructor’s active engagement, there is an opportunity to have a potential negative or positive impact upon the student’s overall experience. A review of these interactions provide an opportunity to identify further themes related to the facilitation of spiritual development. As each instructor uses various techniques, specific methods which are contrasting from one another are highlighted.

As the course is set for eight weeks of academic content, there is a respective assignment during each of the weeks. As well, there is a series of five subjective assignments of which three are Discussion Board Forums and two written assignments. Each week, the instructors are expected to provide a weekly announcement and grade subjective assignments within a week of the due date. In addition to responsibilities within the individual weeks, instructors are expected to have an opening announcement and complete a faculty profile prior to the student’s gaining access. At the conclusion of the course, instructors are to provide a closing announcement once final grades have been submitted. In addition to these interactions, students can contact their instructor via email and correspond about various course or personal matters. This could include items such as an extension on an assignment, questions about the reading or an objective assessment, or to request prayer on a personal item. This study does not collect these interactions; however, it should be noted that each of the instructors felt that they made an attempt to minister to students on a personal level through these one on one correspondences initiated by the student.

Administrative duties and instructor expectations. Though administrative duties may not seem directly connected to the facilitation of spiritual development, the successful completion of
these items helps provide an environment which is more conducive to a positive experience for
the student. Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams both gave credence to the idea that timing in relation to
grading may have an impact upon the student’s experience though they were hesitant to state that
this was directly related to spiritual development. Dr. Williams expressed the importance of
using the little opportunities within the course, such as course announcements, to encourage
students along the process. Dr. Williams stated the principle that he believed that all “these small
things add up.” Dr. Jones initially stated he believed weekly announcements do have an effect
on spiritual development and grading is an opportunity to provide valuable feedback, but in the
end stated that “it depends on the student and not just be a yes or no sort of thing with each email
or grading of assignment.”

Dr. Smith stated that he views students as customers and believes it is important to give
the best product along with their experience. He focuses on quick feedback to students via
graded items and responds to emails 50% of his emails immediately. Dr. Williams indicated that
his goal is to provide quick feedback to students. With the aid of his smart phone, he stated that
he usually emails back students within four hours, almost always within a 24 hour period. Dr.
Williams’ goal for grading all subject assignments is to give feedback within 24 to 48 hours.
Each of the instructors also spoke about the importance of timely weekly announcements,
whether it was to speak to the assignments for the coming week, connect academic content with
spiritual truth, or provide an encouraging word with Scripture.

One of the consistent themes with all of the instructors was the posting of their weekly
announcement and the level of detail present. Each provided helpful resources to guide the
student along the upcoming week, including a review of the upcoming assignments and guidance
for future subjective assignments. Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams spent time reviewing the reading
and included a short summary of the content. Dr. Jones used the subject matter as a starting point for relating some of the academic content in a practical manner for students. Dr. Smith utilized this time to provide a devotional thought for the upcoming week.

It is important to note that these administrative items were completed in a caring manner which did not seek to simply provide the basics, but gave explanation and thought to the upcoming week. Also, for all instructors, the tone of the announcements was friendly and professional. Often the announcements closed with asking a blessing on the student, encouragement, or prayer. All of the instructors emphasized their openness for students to get a hold of them and willingness to help them throughout the term. This was reiterated regularly throughout the course.

In concern to grading and interaction within the course, all of the instructors provided some feedback to the subjective items. Dr. Smith was the most interactive within the grading of the course projects and in his involvement in the Discussion Board. His method of grading was to reattach the student’s project with consistent feedback throughout, provide the grading rubric, and submit a final synopsis of the student’s work. This clearly outlined that the instructor read through the material and provided constructive feedback.

Dr. Smith responded to every student’s post and provided a general post to the class addressing the various interactions in the Discussion Board. Even though these comments were mostly related to the assignment requirements, Dr. Smith did speak to students about encouraging their classmates. Alternatively, Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams provided simple feedback within the grade book for subjective assignments. Their tone was encouraging and expressed appreciation for the student’s work, but only went into specifics when noting what the student did wrong.
Finally, these administrative items were often completed within the allotted time frame and often within half the time. Dr. Smith returned graded assignments to the students within three days of the assignment due date, while Dr. Williams often provided feedback within two to three days of their actual submission – regardless of the assignment due date. Dr. Jones did not always post his grades or comments as quickly. However, the Discussion Board forum often takes place over two weeks (the first week includes the initial post while the second week consists of the replies). As a practice, Dr. Jones would wait until after the second half of the assignment before providing a grade for the first half.

*Sharing personal faith and personal growth.* During the course of the research study, this category of potential interactions was the most dormant. There was limited discussion about the instructor’s own faith and how they have been encouraged in their spiritual walk. In a residential setting, it is not uncommon for an instructor to share their experiences as it relates to matters of faith (Shore, 2007). This can be done through what they have been learning from their personal devotional time, in a current Bible study, or spiritual truths in which they have been wrestling with. These areas are relatively absent from the online instructors interaction with the students. It is important to note that Dr. Jones stated during the interview that this was one area that he had not previously reflected upon that would be beneficial to include within his weekly announcement.

At the beginning of the term, each of the instructors provided personal background information that indicated that the issue of spirituality had a level of importance. During Week Three, Dr. Smith identified his involvement in Adult Sunday School and that the concepts taught in the course would be beneficial for the average church attendee. Dr. Williams identified to his students that he was going on a short mission’s trip during the course and asked them to pray for
him. Dr. Jones specifically expressed his hope to be a part of their learning experience by stating: “. . . my hope is that God might allow me to participate in His work by helping equip his people with a deeper understanding and knowledge of Him, through a deeper understanding of His Word.” Dr. Jones also stated when speaking of the course survey that he hoped students would take this opportunity to leave feedback as he would like to be a better teacher. This expresses humility and the willingness to grow which is characteristic of the Christian faith.

All three instructors utilized Scripture at times to encourage and challenge students. Each week, Dr. Smith provided a verse or a prayer during his devotional thought while Dr. Jones always drew something from the reading in which he wanted the students to ponder and consider in relation to their own walk. This expressed a passion within the instructors that was not just focused on course material, but spiritual growth. Communicating a genuine care for their students, each of the instructors consistently expressed that they were praying for the students. These prayers were often directed at the fact that the student would be challenged in their faith or that God would bless them in their endeavors.

*Genuine expression of care for students.* Of the categories identified, the majority of the interactions displayed by the instructors were expression of genuine concern for the student. The instructors placed a strong emphasis upon the need to understand where the students were in their lives and their own view of being in the role as a “minister” or a “life coach.” The instructors expressed this theme through encouragement and empathy toward the student.

*Expressions of one living out their faith.* The original focus of the category was to identify areas in which the instructor was living out their life and encouraging students to do likewise. Hindman (2002) focused on the importance of the instructor to actively display their faith and as a result students would be more likely to reflect on their own spiritual
development. The ideal community is one in which students could actually practice the areas in which they have been challenged (Hindman, 2002). The only true expression which fits this category is the encouragement of the instructors to pray for one another and encourage one another through the Discussion Boards. This is clearly evident through all of the instructor’s care for one another.

The instructors specifically challenged students in regards to their faith and how it should be lived out. Dr. Jones focused on the relevance of God’s Word for the individuals’ life. Dr. Jones stated, “I am praying that you will continue to develop a love and appreciation for the Old Testament as God’s Word to the church.” This practice is clearly evident in Dr. Jones’s own application of God’s Word while crafting a challenge to his students. Likewise, beginning with the first week, Dr. Smith encouraged the students to live out their faith through prayer: “Our first priority is to be in prayer...for your fellow students, your prof and yourself. You know or will discover that when you try to enhance your knowledge of God’s truth you will face opposition. So let’s cover ourselves good with the armor of God.” Throughout the entire course, he expressed his prayer and his passion through providing of these devotional thoughts.

There were numerous themes expressed throughout the duration of the course within each of the sections. Dr. Smith encouraged his students to live out their faith. He did this through encouraging them to ask students to pray for one another, to be bold in their witness, and to be “under His grace and provision.” Both Dr. Jones and Dr. Williams expressed the hope that students will grow in their spiritual walk. Dr. Williams hoped that through the course they would have a greater passion for God’s Word and greater passion for Him. He also prayed that God would bless them in their “journey” with Him. Dr. Jones stated that he hoped students would “continue to develop a love and appreciation” in regards God’s Word and its application to the
lives of the students. As well, Dr. Jones brought out the theme that God’s Word is relevant to the believer, as he stated numerous times that God’s Word should be applied to their lives and should be moved by the testimony of Scripture.

**Assignment feedback within subjective assignments.** Assignment feedback primarily refers to comments made to students while grading subjective assignments and with specific areas the students did well, need to work on, or challenged to think critically. Dr. Smith provided the most feedback within his course as he was heavily engaged with both the grading of the Discussion Board forums and in the students major projects. As a result, when conducting the student surveys and student interviews, there was more positive comments made about the Dr. Smith’s interaction while the other instructors had decreasing amounts of comments directly related to them based on their overall interaction. The following section will provide a reflection of the various types of interaction which took place within the courses sections studied.

One of the primary environments for instructors and students to engage is within the Discussion Board forum. Dr. Smith indicated that within the Discussion Board, he wants to further conversation specifically in the realm academic thought. If he feels that a student is expressing bad doctrine, he cautiously uses it as an opportunity to ask further questions and to guide their questions in regard to their faith. Dr. Smith noted that the importance of Discussion Boards is to help students think critically about the subject matter. The focus is to provide something “interesting or intriguing within the Discussion Board, so to extend the conversation a little bit.” In regards to feedback, it needs to be intentional as it is not built into the course. Dr. Smith believed that this is where his role of an online instructor comes into play. He stated that
he personally responded to every student within the Discussion Board forum and provided personal feedback.

Community, as described by each of the instructors, takes place within the online classroom primarily through the Discussion Boards. Dr. Williams stated that he believed that without this Discussion Board, there would be no community within the course. Dr. Jones wondered however, if there truly is a sense of meaningful community within the course. As well, Dr. Williams stated that the Discussion Boards have the potential for students to communicate back and forth, but most students tend to “stick to the script.” Both Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams stated that there is a location set up for students to share prayer requests, encourage one another, or ask questions; however, Dr. Williams commented that the area is not typically used.

Despite the skepticism, Dr. Smith believes that the Discussion Boards provides an avenue for community and that the instructor plays a pivotal role within this. Dr. Smith also identifies that he is responsible for this tone and that his need to engage depends upon that particular group dynamic. Some groups are more engaging than others and this changes from term to term. Dr. Jones did identify that he had in previous terms been more active within the Discussion Board forums, but felt that the results were not what he desired. He felt that through the experience there was either less interaction because students reproduced the instructor’s comments, stifled conversation by his interjection, or singled students out either negatively or positively. He expressed that responding to every student would be “extremely time consuming.”

Dr. Smith placed a large degree of emphasis within the interview portion on the use of engaging the concepts taught through the Course Content and through the Discussion Board forums. Out of the other instructors interviewed, Dr. Smith not only stated this heavy emphasis on engagement through the subjective assignments, but practiced it. Though he did not provide
personal comments in conjunction to the grading of each item within the Discussion Board, there
was a response to every student’s thread for the first two forums and then selective students
during the final forum. Comments were related more to the course content and finer points of the
reading. Examples of the comments are as follows:

- “What did [the author] say about the function of prophetic literature? I thank you.”
- “Question for you: What do you think [the author] was talking about when he mentions
  ‘sensus plenior’?”
- “I appreciate [the author’s] recommendation to consult good commentaries for help. It
  seems that they frequently ignore the practical questions Bible readers have in mind. But, I
  appreciate them nevertheless. Finding one’s that “think like I do” is the problem!”
- “I have found that the historical setting can really open up a Bible passage. What we
  guard against though, is taking the non-biblical historical information to the extreme in
  interpretation.”

During a post which summarized the Discussion Board interactions, Dr. Smith encouraged a greater level of interaction between the students. Even at one point Dr. Smith told students he expected that when they reply to classmates that they address them by their first name. This is important to note as Dr. Smith emphasized during the interview that he believed it was the instructor’s role to guide and shape the community.

As well, Dr. Smith’s degree of interaction within the grading of the course projects was much more detailed in comparison to the other instructors. Dr. Smith forwarded the students a template in which they were to submit their assignment. This is not a requirement for the course, but an additional worksheet that Dr. Smith provided. Within his grading, he provided comments on every category that he outlined were necessary. At times the comments were basic, such as
“Yes, indeed!” or “That’s a start” or identified additional points that should be brought out which was more scholastic in nature. In fact, the instructor pointed out specific commentaries that the student could review for further study. Dr. Smith noted this practice within the interview.

This is an important area to make a distinction as the other instructors basically used a scripted response that did not identify specific areas of the student’s project unless there was a deduction of points. Furthermore, Dr. Smith utilized a rubric and provided three categories at the end of the student’s project: Positive Feedback, Constructive Feedback, and Final Assessment. Dr. Smith was intentional to identify areas in which the student excelled and specific areas in which the student could work on while remaining positive during the entire interaction. Though Dr. Jones did not provide the same level of interaction, he warned against the instructor getting into a “rut” and failing to use the opportunity of grading to provide critical feedback and encouragement, which will in turn dampen the student’s experience. Dr. Jones expressed that if the instructor fails to put forth the effort required then he could deter spiritual growth.

**Connecting academic content with spiritual truth.** The manner in which academic content and spiritual truth is connected within the course differed as identified both within the interview portion of this study and as displayed within the course. It is important to note that Dr. Smith places a high importance on the knowledge gleaned from the course as it relates to spiritual transformation. He expressed that he sees himself as a conduit to ensure that the information communicated in the course is relayed to the student. As a result, Dr. Smith expressed that the primary manner in which he sees his contribution is as it relates to the Discussion Boards and through subjective assignments. He also uses the various discussions to direct them to other academic resources outside of the course for their own personal benefit and for further study.
Though Dr. Smith focuses on the use of assignment feedback for connecting the course with spiritual truth, both Dr. Jones and Dr. Smith focus on the use of their weekly announcement to provide a deeper level of reflection and conveyed how spiritual truth can be applied to the lives of students. Dr. Smith in his approach provided more description on the importance of studying in relation to spiritual growth. He stated within the first weekly announcement, “Even though our work may look academic at times, we are still intersecting with the truth of God’s Word by God’s Spirit and that is not academic.” Later in the course, he spoke about the importance of the skills learned within this course and how it leads to the proper interpretation of Scripture. He concluded at the end of the course by stating: “It is now time to put into practice the principles that you have learned.” His focus was not an overt attempt to connect academic content with spiritual truths, but he did deem it necessary to leave them with words of encouragement, a verse to ponder, or a written prayer.

Dr. Jones, in contrast, often did not state the importance of the course content or provide devotional thoughts, but provided examples of how the course content could be connected to Christ and then ultimately to their daily lives. Out of the eight weekly announcements, there was only one announcement that did not connect to the life of Christ. Here are some examples of the connections made by Dr. Jones:

- Week 1: “What distinguishes us as Christians from the other religions of the world is the core conviction that God has spoken and acted in history, most recently in and through Jesus.”
- Week 6: “Challenge yourselves, therefore, in light of your understanding of the OT, to think about how the authors of the NT understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Israel’s hope—a hope that now encompassed all the nations, and all of creation.”
• Concluding Announcement: “Through our study of the Scriptures, I hope that you have come to a deeper understanding of how much God loves the world, and how good the news is that, in Jesus, the righteousness of God has been revealed for all of creation.”

Each conversation began with the weekly reading, but quickly was transitioned to the person of Christ.

Furthermore, Dr. Jones used these same announcements to not only connect academic truth, but to challenge students on a personal level. All but one week, Dr. Jones took time to provide a thought which connected the reading to some type of spiritual charge or prayer.

Provided below are some examples from his announcements:

• “The work of God in Saul/Paul’s life is also a testament to the transforming power of God’s grace, which changes our lives. I pray that each one of you knows the power of this transforming work of God in your own life.”

• “Challenge yourselves, therefore, in light of your understanding of the OT, to think about how the authors of the NT understood Jesus to be the fulfillment of Israel’s hope—a hope that now encompassed all the nations, and all of creation.”

• “When Jesus returns at his second-coming, he will sit on his throne and judge every person, separating the ‘sheep’ from the ‘goats’ (Matt 25:31-46). Are you ready for this? If not, I would be happy to talk more about it with you.”

Dr. Jones’ weekly announcements provided a look at the tasks that were to be completed for the week and encouragement, but the bulk of his announcements were spent on challenging his students in their spiritual growth.

Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams would ask students to think critically about the content. Dr. Smith gave the students a passage to read, which corresponded with the current class reading,
and gave a personal story of an individual who was witnessing in a very casual way. Then he
gave charge that God “honors a courageous witness.” He didn’t say anything else, but just gave
the student the thought to ponder. At one point Dr. Williams reflected upon the issue of
thanksgiving while citing Psalm 103 and asked students to think about the areas in which they
have been blessed by God. These are moments in which the students are being asked to
participate and invest themselves into the material being reviewed.

Dr. Williams approach was more hands free in connecting academic and spiritual truth. He
noted, for example, that he sticks closely to the course content and does not seek to make
additional attempts to make connections between these two areas. He stated that he did not want
to add more to the course design as he wants to “make sure it has the DNA of what the creator
meant for that course without adding more.” Likewise, he believes that students are more
challenged in the course, in regards to spiritual development, through the course design and not
his actual interaction. He believes that this would be different however for a non-religion course.
As a result, his announcements covered the expectations required of him, but often fanned away
from going into too much depth. Dr. Williams would include a verse to encourage students and
stated at both the beginning and the end of the course how he hoped they would be encouraged
through God’s Word and be challenged in their faith. In regards to utilizing the Discussion
Board, Dr. Williams states that he allows students to freely express their faith as long as they
show that they have read and are responding to the text. He does not see a reason to challenge
them on their expression. Dr. Williams indicated, though, that he opens up the Discussion Board
with an introduction and carefully pays attention to the various interactions which take place.

**Student reflection on instructor engagement.** Throughout the eight week period of the
course, students were aware of the level of engagement present within the instructors and were
receptive overall to their instructor’s interaction. For example, both Dr. Jones’ and Dr. Smith’s courses noted the weekly announcements and devotional thoughts; however, students within Dr. Smith’s course also noted the level of detail that he provided within his engagement in the course through subjective assignments. When asked, “How has the instructor met, or failed to meet, your expectations in concern to spiritual guidance within the course?” Christine answered by stating, “He met my expectations by challenging my reading, thinking and writing skills.”

Students continually made positive comments to Dr. Smith’s engagement and the positive influence he had upon their experience in the course. Half of the students surveyed indicated that the instructor asked further questions, provided positive reinforcements or caused more self-assessment and evaluation. Hannah noted, “Even on assignments I did well on, he asked questions to provoke further thought and study. No matter how much I understood, he pushed me to learn more.” This seemed to create an environment in which students had greater reflection within their studies and began to ask more questions. Esther stated, “I received great feedback from my instructor and he let me know if I had a misunderstanding about something and he told me where to find it in the Bible. To continue my studies and keep reading and asking questions.” Other students commented that they were asked further questions within their assignments and that caused them to go back to the text.

All three of the students interviewed, spoke highly of their interactions with Dr. Smith and the impact he made within the course on a spiritual level. Like the student surveys, the issue which was repeated by all three students, was the level of engagement that Dr. Smith had within the course, specifically within the subjective assignments. Linda felt that his level of engagement was not typical for all of the classes in which she has completed. She enthusiastically stated, “He individually gave feedback, which was amazing.” Abigail found in her experience that “some
professors don’t comment at all on your Discussion Board.” She felt that Dr. Smith’s comments were “very thought provoking” and felt encouraged by his comments. She stated that they were supportive in nature and challenged her to think deeper about the subject matter.

The students within Dr. Jones’ course identified that there was strong communication in the course and that they felt challenged academically. The students revealed in the interview that they knew exactly what was expected out of them and recognized that the instructor utilized personal devotions which connected with the subject matter. Daniel found that the instructor’s insight was “heavy and he seemed on top of his theology.” However, he expressed skepticism that those who were not at the same point would simply want to get to the requirements for the week. Tony stated that he felt Dr. Jones made a “good effort in sending out emails with verses, devotional to try to encourage students . . . .” Tony believes at these moments when issues arise in the classroom, the instructors can show the love of Christ and make a difference within the course interactions. Julie also expressed that Dr. Jones caused her to “take action on my spiritual beliefs.” One student indicated that the instructor’s announcement caused them to reevaluate their own spiritual relationship.

Out of the three instructors, there was a lower level of engagement by Dr. Williams found primarily within the weekly announcements. This seemed to be indicative by the fact that when speaking of the course’s overall influence, the students seemed to speak more to the course design rather than the instructor’s interaction. Yet, students still expressed that the instructor conveyed support for the students and made attempts to provide encouragement. Students felt that Dr. Williams was genuine in the faith he expressed. Mary stated that, “In his personal writings to the class he made his faith evident! Also through his instruction. It is a great class!.” Robert even remembered that during the first weekly announcement, Dr. Williams stated the
purpose for the course was to “gain a greater passion for Him and his word.” When asked about steps that the instructor took in order to share their faith, the students noted that it was through Dr. William’s weekly announcements and emails that he mentioned his faith. Though comments made by students were not as specific as the other courses and were not necessarily related to any specific interactions, students still felt that Dr. Williams was available and were encouraged through the course.

**Reflections on Course Interaction and Design**

Some students did indicate during the course of the interview that though they did appreciate the interaction provided by the instructor, they believed that the course design played a more important factor within their experience. Samuel, from Dr. Jones’ course stated that, “You’d probably get a deeper answer if you referred to the course designer” and then later indicated that he did “not place much weight on the instructor” but on the course design. Two students stated that they felt more of a connection with the online lecturers within the weekly modules (another student noted this connection as well at one point). Daniel wondered if it would be helpful for the instructors to also provide a video of themselves to allow a more personal touch. Daniel thought it might be good to “let students know a little more and even encourage someone who wasn’t along in their faith if they see them at one point.” Tony also expressed that for him, the instructor’s engagement was limited because he was not “really looking to my school instructors for spiritual leadership or encouragement.” He indicated that he gets this support from the community around him. However, this comment seems more reflective of the biased perceptions of not being able to establish community within an online environment as opposed to a traditional residential setting (Swan, 2002).
The majority of the comments made about Dr. William’s course in regards to spiritual development, were in relation to the curriculum and course design. When comments were made about the instructor, they were not as specific as the other courses and were not necessarily related to any specific interactions. However, it is important to note that students still felt he was available and that there was a general sense of encouragement which was communicated throughout the course. Caleb did state though that he was skeptical on the ability to truly connect on a spiritual level within the online learning environment within Dr. Williams’ course. He stated, “I don’t know if you can truly understand your audience and connect with them at that personal level that I believe a spiritual connection has to be developed at.” However, overall, he was pleased with his experience with the instructor.

When the instructors were asked about further steps that could be taken to foster spiritual development, the conversation switched to the current course design. All three instructors seemed hesitant in part due to the expectations from the regular reading, video lectures, and weekly assignments. Dr. Williams felt overall that his various interactions were more subtle in approach as he was concerned about adding additional expectations on the students. Dr. Jones identified specifically that he believed that the current level of interaction was fairly appropriate. He contends that diminishing the role of the instructor would in fact be hurtful, but increasing the role would most likely be more than the instructor could bear. Dr. Smith stated during the interview process that he did not put a heavy emphasis on the importance of the weekly announcements and that he felt students did not need additional items as the course was heavy with course reading and assignments.

Dr. Jones suggested that adding additional responsibilities, such as personal contact with every student via phone, would be extremely difficult for the instructor as they schedule to find
additional time to complete the task. Dr. Jones did suggest that one potential opportunity that could be added would be to provide a time at the beginning of the course in which the instructor is available to the course through an online video platform. Doing so would give the students an opportunity to ask the instructor questions about the course.

Dr. Jones believes that “the course design is important, but it is not as quite significant as professor involvement.” This position is consistent with his previous statements which indicate that instructors have a dynamic opportunity to cause the course content to come alive with practical application. He held that not only is it important to connect academic and spiritual truth within the classroom, but people learn better when they feel they have a use for it. Dr. Jones stated that the role of the instructor is not just to help students see the material as purely academic, but that it relates to their lives. Dr. Jones holds that it is important for the course to have instructor interaction, appropriate course design, and manageable, yet meaningful and thought-provoking assignments.

**Summary**

The reoccurring themes present within the student surveys and interviews are consistent with the methods employed by the instructors while facilitating their courses. All three instructors noted the importance of encouraging the students during their courses and addressing students requests and questions. Students noted that this encouragement allowed them to be more comfortable in regard to the discussion of spiritual beliefs. As well, students indicated that their instructors felt relatable, accepting, friendly, available, and open. The words of encouragement were reported to be present not only within the weekly announcement, but in email correspondence and with assignment feedback.
Emerging from the case study was apparent differences in the manner that the instructors engaged in the course and how the students perceived these interactions. This is important as it reveals that the manner of interaction by the instructor did affect the student’s experience. Most notably, these differences were revealed in the way that the instructor perceived themselves and how they purposely choose to interact with the course. Students identified that Dr. Jones attempted to encourage them in their faith, they thought about how the text could be applied, and took action based on those principles. Dr. Smith clearly spent time focusing on his feedback with subjective assignments; the students identified that this caused them to have a greater interaction with the course content, which in turn challenged them spiritually. The least amount of descriptive feedback was related to Dr. Williams. Yet this is not surprising as his level of interaction was often less than the other instructors.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This study sought to understand how instructors contribute to the spiritual development of students in an online course at a distinctively evangelical institution. Understanding that the methods used must be validated through the student’s perception in which they instructed. A case study approach provides a stronger analysis of the type of interactions taking place while taking into account the perceptions of both the instructor and the students. Through reviewing instructor and students, in three sections of a required introductory religion course of the same course design, an analysis of various techniques and reactions by the various members could be more clearly seen. The Constant Comparison Method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was utilized in order to identify specific techniques in which the instructors interacted within their course beyond a broad basic category. Both of these methods provided the researcher with a more personal view of the interactions which took place and the perceptions between both parties as it related to the facilitation of spiritual development. Specifically, the research study consisted of conducting an instructor interview, a review of the course interactions, completion of an open ended survey, and follow-up interview by the students who recently finished the corresponding course.

Summary

Based on the findings of this study, the instructor does contribute to the spiritual development of the students and there is a stated perception of the students in the level of engagement in this facilitation by the instructor. The study revealed that the instructor’s interactions help to establish an environment which not only helps to facilitate academic growth, but encourages students to reflect upon their own spiritual development throughout the term.
This is consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) Social Constructivism model which looks to the role of community for effective learning to take place. Likewise, steps to foster spiritual development are present through the establishment of a relationship between the instructor and the student. The themes summarized below are reflective of the different methods utilized by the three instructors studied within the course. The level of engagement and perception of the students varies by the intent of the instructor; yet, there are common threads that each of the instructors focus on which had a direct impact on the course. Prior to looking at these various it is important to consider the various observations made during the course and its correlation to the current research. Furthermore, by reflecting on this literature along with the various methods utilized within the course, it will provide a greater insight into the role of the instructor in the facilitation of spiritual development within an online classroom.

**Comparison with Literature**

One of the central concerns with online learning is mitigating the distance between the learner and the learning environment. The current literature clearly articulates the need for the instructor to be purposeful in their interaction and to provide steps in the process to help the student meet the desired end (Mahmood, Mahmood & Malik, 2012; Moore, 1977; Wood, Brunnel, & Ross, 1976). Each of the instructors within this study showed this intentionality by recognizing their unique role of the instructor as coming along the student and providing a support system during their educational pursuits. This attitude is consistent with Taylor and Holley (2009) whose study revealed that the faculty saw their role as more than just academic, but support.

Unique to this evangelical institution from secular institutions, is the close identification of the instructors with their role as a minister. Thus the instructors purposefully encouraged their
students, provided timely feedback, and clear instruction expectations within the course. This positive environment created by each of the instructors seems consistent with Pruitt’s (2011) professional experience which focused on the instructor’s guidance in creating a conducive learning environment. Though suggested by Davidson-Shivers (2009) that the primary way in which interaction took place were within the grade book, the study revealed that the instructors went beyond these constraints. Each of the instructors indicated that they communicated with students and their needs through email. They took time to utilize the weekly announcements to not only lay out course expectations, but encourage them in their spiritual walk. This created an environment beyond the grade book and students did recognize this additional attention.

Each of the instructors was purposeful to ensure that this environment was present. Miller (2001) recognized that it was the role of the instructor as the facilitator to provide an environment which was conducive to a positive learning environment that supported access to the instructor and critical thinking. Each of the areas identified previously by Tallents-Runnels et al. (2006) which contributed to a positive online experience was present within this study, with the exception of “employing collaborative learning strategies” (p. 101). Each of the instructors clearly made themselves available to students and encouraged them to take part in a positive learning environment. Dr. Smith specifically recognized that his role is to have the students look deeper into the content and saw his feedback within subjective assignments as his opportunity to challenge them. This is consistent with Lowe (2010) whose study indicated that the more knowledge gained along with community and personal growth, the more the student was encouraged in their faith. Olson (2011) emphasizes that the purposeful design of the course and intentional interactions is the avenue to help foster this type of spiritual development.
The study found that students had an overall positive experience both within the course and with the instructor. Consistent with Chang (2009), the findings indicated that clear and timely communication by the instructor resulted in a positive perception of the instructor by the students. Contrary to Shu-Fang and Aust (2008) who suggested that students may post more frequently to impress their instructors, through the interviews the students seemed to indicate an overall satisfaction with the instructor which caused them to be more reflective of the topics. There was no indication present that the quality of the post was related to the instructor’s attention. However, it should be noted that within the course the vast majority of students did not seek to further engage the conversation beyond the requirements of the assignment. The students’ perception was that the instructor did care about them and was attentive to their needs. It is interesting to note Morris et al. (2004) study which found that students who were comfortable within a religious institution had an overall positive experience as this seemed to be the case with the students surveyed.

**Openness to Spiritual Development**

The case study revealed that in general there was an openness in the students to spiritual development as well as positive identification by the instructors of their supporting role. Out of the 29 students who completed the open-ended survey, 24 indicated that the school being Christian was a significant factor when choosing where to study. As well, the students indicated overwhelmingly that the role of faith should be present within the classroom setting. This indicates that there is a significant population that is looking for spiritual development or is at least open to the stated mission and purpose of the institution. When the instructors were asked of their perception of student’s openness to issues of faith, there was a commonality felt that the students were open and only in extreme cases have they felt students being contrary to this
expression. There was not a reported realization by the instructor to the level of openness that students portrayed themselves as related to spiritual development. This is emphasized by the fact that all of the students interviewed placed importance on the issue of faith and that a majority of the students indicated that this was a deciding factor when choosing their institution of study.

An important aspect of the instructor’s engagement within the course was the manner in which they viewed their role as it related to spiritual development. Each of the instructors made an attempt to be encouraging to the students through their interactions and sought to understand their current situation. There was an authentic and genuine desire to see changes in the students and their relationship with God. Likewise, the instructors perceived their role not simply to impart knowledge, but to minister. They perceived their position not as a job, but as a responsibility and a calling from God to have an impact upon the students in which they were teaching. Thus their interactions were reflective of showing care and compassion to the students. They desired to help them in their life journey. They desired to create an environment which was positive. Words such as “spiritual mentor” or “coach” were used to describe their role and interactions. Their various interactions were reflective of their ministerial heart in that all of the instructors went out of their way to contact students who had difficulties, sent encouraging and edifying comments, and shared reflections from Scripture. There was clear intentionality in their interactions and this was perceived by the students.

Part of the reason that words such as “spiritual mentor” or “coach” were used is most likely related to their perception of the course design being the main method in which instruction is imparted. The instructors came alongside of the material and provided support to the student as they worked through the course. There was a consistent theme from the instructors that their goal
was to see the student grow as a result of the course and they believe that they played a role within that process.

**Instructor Encouragement**

One of the central themes present within the course is the encouraging manner in which the instructors engaged the course. All three instructors ensured that they were positive and uplifting to their students in their communication. They often greeted their students in a friendly tone, stated that they were praying for the students, expressed God’s blessing upon them, and asked students to pray for one another. They repeatedly told students that they were available for them and would address the students by name within their graded assignments. When asked how the instructor had encouraged them to evaluate their own spiritual beliefs, the students responded back overwhelmingly by noting that the instructor was in fact encouraging in their interactions and this provided a positive experience in which they reflected upon their faith. When there was a positive portrayal of instructor interaction, there was also a greater expression of satisfaction with the student’s overall experience. Per the instructor and student’s perception, there seemed to be a positive interaction between the instructor and the student, which Garzon, Hall, Magin and Murphey (2009) identified, is important to the integration of academic knowledge and spiritual truth.

Encouragement becomes an avenue in which the instructor can live out their faith in a practical manner. Dr. Jones indicated that through encouragement an environment is created in which the student is more receptive to the instructor’s interactions. Even when instructors, felt the need to correct students, they would find positive ways to reaffirm the student in the work that they had submitted, while highlighting areas that need to be worked on in the future. General messages were also sent to the class as whole to express satisfaction with section’s
performance and interaction with one another. As a result, students were not only exposed to academic knowledge, but an environment was created which was hospitable and edifying. The students knew that their instructor was there to assist them which would in turn create trust and commonality between the instructor and student.

**Instructor Empathy**

In conjunction with the instructor’s encouraging interaction within the course, there was an expression by the instructors of how there is intentionality to understand the student’s current situation and how this might impact their studies while taking online courses. As well, during the student interviews, the students themselves noted that they did not have time to engage in community because of other various obligations and often focused on the completion of the tasks. The instructors indicated that they were willing to work with students if there was extenuating circumstances and were willing to help them to do their best. This was evident as the instructors communicated to students that they would be given another chance if they did poorly and students were allowed to turn in their assignment late if tardy. During the course of the interviews, students expressed that there were times in which they faced some type of technical difficulty or were going to be late on an assignment and the instructor worked with them during their situation. The instructors indicated that they believe it was essential to understand that the typical online student does not have the same responsibilities that are present for residential students. The belief is that these moments will provide opportunity to minister to them as a person and thus affect their overall experience.

Much in the same way that encouraging students creates a conducive environment for spiritual development, showing compassion and empathy to students puts these words into action. By students experiencing grace, being given assistance, or a listening ear, this not only
met real needs within their personal or academic life, but showed that the instructor was genuine. Dr. Williams emphasized that it is through this expressed and tangible care that the spiritual truth can be communicated and realized. Even areas such as being respectful of a student’s time as related to grading or administrative items, can prevent barriers being set in place. As a Christian educator, it is important that the same humility that Christ portrays (Philippians 2:5-11) is present in our actions and attitude toward others.

Four sub themes were identified in this study in which instructors empathized with students; they include: Care for students as individuals; empathize with student’s status; providing help for success; and encouraging students in their faith. The care for students expressed was not only intentional, but expressed themselves as being genuine. The instructors took time to speak to real issues that the students were facing and even at times contacted them directly. This established relationship between the instructor and student creates an environment which allows the instructor to speak to greater spiritual truth within the life of the individual while encouraging them academically (Ripley, Garzon, Hall, Mangis & Murphy, 2009).

By recognizing what is taking place in their lives, realizing that the distance in online education needs to be mitigated, and the challenges that they face, causes the students to believe that their instructor cares. And this provides an avenue in which the instructor can communicate their faith and speak with authority to the deeper needs within the students. This care about the student as it related to matters of faith was evident in that they charged the students to reflect upon scripture and that they hoped the student grew along the process. Dr. Williams even liked their time within the course as a “journey” and hoped that their “passion” for Scripture was deepened through the course. Furthermore, the instructors recognize that this journey represents its own unique hurdles which may not be present in the non-adult learner. The instructors’
mindset is consistent with the study by Bressler, Bressler, and Bressler (2010) which surveyed 232 online students who indicated a higher level of stress which was a result of family and career responsibilities. All of the instructors empathized with the students and provided support for the adult learner.

**Instructor Engagement**

Though there were similarities in the manner in which the instructors interacted within the courses, there were also distinct differences which seemed to have an impact on the student’s overall perception as related to spiritual development. In concern to differences, the following should be noted: Dr. Jones was intentional in connecting academic content with spiritual truth and proactive in utilizing the weekly announcements to speak to the week’s content; Dr. Smith placed a strong emphasis on Discussion Board interaction and providing thorough feedback within the grading of assignments; Dr. Williams shared personal thoughts and connected practical spiritual truths via devotionals. Within the three experiences, students seemed to express the greatest connection in concern to spiritual development, with their interactions with Dr. Smith. However, this is not surprising as greater instructor interaction in relation to the Discussion Board (Xie, Debacker & Ferguson, 2006) and high quality interaction which may be seen through the grading of assignments (Hill, Song, & West, 2009; Beasley, 2007) would have a great impact upon the student’s perceived learning. It would be consistent that this too would include the manner in which a student was encouraged to consider and interact with their own personal faith.

The students identified in the open ended survey and the later interview portion that the instructor intentionally worked to provide a greater understanding of Scripture. The students felt encouraged in their faith through being challenged to wrestle with the various concepts. This
intentional interaction within the forums and grading seemed to solicit the greatest response from students in concern to their overall experience with the instructor as related to spiritual development. As well, the instructor did not seek to provide specific right or wrong to the various topics, but encouraged the students to think more critically by asking the student various questions or providing additional reading to consider. Hines et al. (2009) stated that it is this type of environment in which students feel free to share their beliefs and then receive constructive feedback essential for spiritual and academic learning. This is coupled with the fact that they had previously felt their encouragement and empathy from their instructor. Thus, when the instructor engaged, the student responded positively to these attempts and looked for direction.

A consistent level of interaction present within all three instructors, which students also indicated an appreciation, was the attention to administrative items. Though these are tasks are usually in the background, they can affect the student’s overall perception of instructor capability and care for the student (Change, 2009). While these administrative items may not attract attention, the instructors were purposeful in their completion and the students reported only positive interactions with their instructors. As well, they expressed greater appreciation when the instructor was attentive to the course and grading of subjective assignments. Within Dr. Smith’s course, there was clear positive response to his detail to respond to every student’s subjective assignment with detail. This is consistent with Menchaca and Bekele (2008) who found that students prioritized this type of interaction within this course. Likewise, when this attention was given to assignments, students were more apt to focus on how the instructor engaged with them rather than the course content. This indicates that purposeful interaction by the instructor creates a positive perception within the student of the instructor’s role in the course and related to spiritual development.
A final theme which can be derived from this study is the intentionality to include devotional thoughts and the connection of academic content with spiritual truth. All three of instructors, at some point in the course, provided a devotional thought which was outside of the original purpose of the course content. Often this encouraged students within their own daily lives and was reinforced by the instructor during their weekly announcements. Students expressed that these devotional thoughts along with the Scripture used, helped encourage them throughout the course and thus created a positive environment. Likewise, it should be noted that Dr. Jones was specifically intentional with connecting the academic content with the spiritual truth. The students report that this encouraged them spiritually, caused them to reflect deeper, and to reevaluate their spiritual development. However, it should be noted that in the area of the instructor speaking to their own faith and personal growth, which was suggested within the literature (Shore, 2007), it was nearly absent from all of the instructors’ interaction with their courses.

**Reflections on Course Interaction and Design**

A few concluding points in relation to the facilitation of spiritual development should be noted as observed through the data collection and analysis. In reflection to the various instructor interactions, when there was less engagement within the course by the instructor by means of Discussion Board interaction, grading of subjective assignments, and connection of spiritual truth within the weekly announcements—there was a greater tendency by the student to identify the course content and design as the aspect which affected them spiritually throughout the term. Students in the course with greatest level of interaction by the instructor noted this aspect the least when they reflected upon their experience. It should also be noted that students spoke of the use of video to connect them with the instructor. This was pointed out a couple of times to
recognize the greater connection that the student had with the pre-recorded lecturer over the instructor, but also as a suggestion to help the instructor feel more relatable to the student.

Though the course design focused on intentionally bringing students into community, the students indicated their skepticism of connecting on a spiritual level with this environment in general. Tony expressed, for example, that he was not looking toward the online community to grow spiritually, but looked to his local community. When asked about community within the interview portion, none of the students felt a high degree of affinity in the manner that it affected their spiritual growth. This is important to consider when realizing the demographic of the online learner and the mission and purpose of the institution. Though community can be an avenue to increase engagement and perceived learning, it does not seem through this study to be an influence on spiritual development.

**Limitations**

This study provided a brief view of instructor interaction as it related to spiritual development within the scope of one course completed at an evangelical Christian school. The strength is that it provides a detailed look at the various interactions which took place in a specific time frame and environment in order to identify various themes and methodology used; however, it is also limited by those same constraints. One of the primary limitations of this study is that the focus was limited to an eight week study and did not reflect upon the various interactions which took place over a larger period of time. If this study would be conducted over a greater period of time, there might be additional methods utilized by the instructor which were not seen. Or there may be specific issues that the instructor has to deal with in a given term that was not represented within these interactions. For example, there was not a clear incident of dealing with a tragedy in the course or various extenuating circumstances. This could also relate
to a student who was openly against the instructor’s inclusion of faith or even a student body which was more engaged with the aspect of community with each other in the Discussion Board. Conversely, there may have been methods identified which are not typically used by the instructor and would not be construed as normative.

In relation to the duration of study, the research is also limited to the focus of the student on one instructor’s experience within a given time frame. Though the students could express their overall perception of the instructor, they were not asked to reflect on their overall experience and factors outside of this instructor which has affected spiritual development. As well, the focus was on the experience of an individual instructor during an eight week period in contrast to the overall experience with instructors during the course of their time at the institution. This could provide further review on the impact of the instructor and the primary manner in which the student was affected by their experience.

Furthermore, a limitation of this study is that the research focused on a required course for non-religion majors found within the School of Religion. This was helpful as it provided a look at a course which would intentionally seek to facilitate spiritual development; however, the direction in which this facilitation took place became a little more unclear. For example, the instructors indicated that the course design was a driving force for this purpose and students had the potential to identify the reading, online lectures, and assignments as what facilitated their spiritual development. Studying a course outside of the School of Religion, would have given a clearer picture of the intentionality of the instructor to facilitate spiritual development. In conjunction with this limitation, the course also focused primarily on the interactions with the instructor and not geared specifically toward the interactions with the course content and the other students within the course. Swan (2002) indicated that these three components, instructor,
course, and student interaction, contributes to the student’s overall online experience. These other elements were not focused upon and may affect one another.

The interactions reviewed within this study focused primarily on the participants’ perceptions and the events which were recorded in the online classroom. This scope was limited as it did not review the interactions which took place between instructor and student email correspondence. This would often be the avenue in which students may express questions or concerns for the class. As well, students can also ask for extensions because of life circumstances or ask for prayer. The instructor’s responses would provide a proper glimpse at the manner in which they minister to students. Dr. Williams indicated that he felt that his true ministry began at these points. However, though the study was limited in collecting this data, there was clear indication by the students that the instructors were an encouragement and did minister on a personal level.

Implications

The clearest implication which can be derived from this study is that instructor interaction does have an effect upon the student as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual development; furthermore, specific methods can be studied in order to identify potential practices. In this study, it was not only clearly indicated that instructors were intentional in their role to help guide students in their spiritual journey, but they saw their role itself as one of ministry. As a result, the instructors were intentional in their interactions and this was identified as well by the students. However, both instructor and student did give the understanding that there are challenges along with online learning. Some of the students did indicate that there was not a desire to be engaged with community and these were the same students who did not seem to be affected as much by the instructor’s interactions. However, the students who had a greater
desire to be connected were quicker to speak about the positives that they associated with their instructor’s interactions. This is consistent with Nandi et al. (2012) who identified the student-instructor interaction as being essential within this environment. This highlights even more the importance of establishing a learning environment in which the students feel connected to the course, instructor, and other learners.

At the same time, it is appropriate to note that though students were encouraged by their interactions with their instructor, students did not indicate the same level of encouragement spiritually from their peers. This is important as it relates to the course design and the fulfillment of the institution’s mission and purpose, as the establishment of community is often connected with the student’s experience within the course (Jung 2001). Yet, this lack of interest in peer interaction is consistent with students looking primarily to their instructor for support and guidance (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). Based on these findings, it would indicate that this same perception relates not just to academic content, but to spiritual development. This is an important area of consideration for the course designer as it would move the focus to the instructor’s interaction or to reevaluate how dialogue can be further enhanced within student to student interaction. As Hines, McGee, Waller, and Waller (2009) suggested, it is important for evangelical institutions to make sure that the programs which they have set in place are consistent with the overall mission and purpose of the school.

From this, an implication can be made both from the specific practices that were utilized by the instructors and also the instructor mindset when interacting with the students. The research indicated that like perceived learning, the interaction which takes place by the instructor to help the students think more critically, can also have an impact upon spiritual development. This is consistent with Sher (2009) who identified a correlation between the interaction with the
instructor and perceived learning. As well, this also related to the course satisfaction. This should be noted below as an area for further study. Also, the instructors all had the mindset of being an encouragement and understanding where the student was coming from. This mindset has already affected me as the researcher as I have continued to have interactions with online students during the course of this study. As well, the administration and course designers need to be sensitive to the fact that the more the instructor provided constructive interaction, the greater the perception of the instructor’s role. If perceived learning and spiritual development is related to this relationship, then steps should be taken to create a more inviting environment for the instructor to engage. Both Dr. Smith and Dr. Williams, expressed concern about overstepping the purview of the course design. The former still chose to engage while the later seemed more cautious to do so. Clear expectations should be communicated to instructors of how they are to interact with the course design, including both their liberty and limitations. As well, Rovai (2002) indicated that lack of understanding the theoretical base found within online learning may result in less intentionality; thus, providing this theory along with practical steps for engagement would be beneficial to the instructor. As well, as there was a difference in how the instructors engaged within the course, I would agree with Gerber et al. (2005) that there needs to be further training present related to the facilitation of discussion and critical thinking skills.

It should also be noted that the mindset of the instructors was driven by seeing their position as one of ministry. Within an evangelical institution, administrators should consider how their instructors view themselves and their role as related to the issue of spiritual development. Though there is clear communication to provide proper administrative support and interaction within the classroom to the student, there should also be a focus on the need to provide support
in the realm of spiritual development. One of the clear areas noted from this study is that the instructors knew word for word the mission statement of the institution and it was evident through their dealings with their class. This particular institution clearly articulated this purpose and it was clearly demonstrated through the actions of their faculty. This seems to imply in part that the faculty members agreed with the institution’s purpose and sought to implement this philosophy through actions and instruction.

Both the instructors and students saw the course design as an important factor as it related to spiritual development. Granted that this course’s primary focus is to encourage students within the discipline of Biblical studies, identified as a limitation; however, the design played an important part in contributing to the institution’s mission and purpose. The question should be raised to the administration and course designers of whether this should be intentionally implemented or charged as a separate responsibility to the instructor. Based on the continuity of content, it would seem consistent that this would fall under the purview of the course designer. However, based on the need to establish a connection with the students, it would seem to be more natural for this to come from the instructor in a non-scripted fashion. It may be appropriate for purposeful training in helping instructors express their faith and encourage spiritual development within an online forum.

One final point that should be drawn from this study, which was not directly sought, is the openness of students to the facilitation of spiritual development. The majority of these students desired to be challenged and encouraged in their faith. Though it may be inferred that they are simply looking for an online education, they also choose the institution for a specific reason. As a result, institutions should consider how they can help foster this growth within their unique student body.
Recommendations for Future Research

A recommendation for future research is to conduct a similar study as it related to a course outside of the School of Religion. This will allow a greater focus on specific steps taken by the instructor to encourage students in their spiritual development within various disciplines. As well, this study could focus on required courses within the student’s specific discipline and identify the effectiveness of connecting the academic content with spiritual truth. For example, one student within the study indicated how their accounting course focused on integrity and ethics within their study. How then would the instructor attempt to encourage their students in both their studies and their personal walk? Furthermore, the study by Davidson-Shivers (2009) indicated that the primary type of interaction was within the grade book. The instructors within this study utilized other methods, via email, weekly announcements, discussion boards, which could help to contribute to the student’s spiritual development. Is this action consistent with other departments and more unique within evangelical institutions in order to connect academic and spiritual truth?

Likewise, this study could also be replicated at other evangelical institutions to determine whether instructors take varying approaches in how they interact with students and the completion of administrative items. It is logical to conclude that some of the practices put into place are a result of instructor expectations within the course. The question would then need to focus on how the changing of perimeters affects the instructor’s engagement and thus the facilitation of spiritual development.

Another study that could be completed is to look at the students’ overall experience at an evangelical institution and seek to understand what factors contribute to the students’ overall interactions as related to spiritual development in an online environment. This study would
review students’ interactions with various instructors across different terms and disciplines. The purpose would be to derive consistent methods that they saw were utilized and whether they felt challenged in regards to their faith during their time at the institution. The focus of this study should also look at specific programs outside of academia, which is utilized by the institution, to help their students grow in faith. This could include access to counseling, chapel, or online community groups. In addition, the study could seek to determine how these cocurricular activities integrate with online instruction in contrast with residential programs. Furthermore, if there is a lack of these programs in the online format, then what effect will it have on the student’s overall experience.

The students within this study indicated a fair amount of openness to the discussion of faith within their completion of the open-ended survey. Therefore another recommendation for future research is to study the openness of faith in the classroom. This level of openness could be contrasted with the residential population or within other evangelical institutions. Also, the question can be asked as to what extent the students are willing to have the discussion as it relates to matters of faith. It would also be beneficial to understand the level of expectation in regards to their faith and whether this was met during their time at the school. As well, the focus of this study has been on the instructor’s perception as it relates to spiritual development and students were asked to reflect upon their experiences based on the instructor’s interaction. A future study should look at this same issues from the perspective of the students and begin by asking the students what has affected their spiritual development within online learning, both in and outside of the classroom.

It would also be beneficial to direct research toward the communication of the mission and goals of the institution along with the importance during the hiring and training purposes.
The instructors who participated in this study understood the mission of the institution, but would the manner in which the instructors engage vary based on “buying in” to this purpose? It would be appropriate to look at varying evangelical institutions and whether faculty members hold to the same institutional mission. This would include the manner in which the institutions communicate their purpose and intentionality in carrying it out. Furthermore, are the institutions purposeful when hiring faculty members in how they perceive their roles and the intentionality within professional development?

This could be further reflected within research by reviewing the stated goals and objectives within the course design. As well, this study indicated that when instructors were more purposeful in their interactions that the students responded positively. Based on course design, it would be beneficial to determine whether instructors felt the openness to challenge students as it related to spiritual development or whether they felt constrained. Furthermore, based on the reflections of the instructors stating that they were working within the constraints of course design, it would be appropriate to conduct the same study reviewing the effects of course design on spiritual development. This could include a review of the students’ impressions from the course reading, online lectures, and specific assignments. Instead of conducting an interview which focuses on the instructor’s perception, the course designer could be asked a modified set of questions which would look at the same areas. This would provide a greater understanding of the connection between course design and the students’ experience with the instructor within the classroom.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to understand instructor interaction as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual development within an evangelical institution. The study sought to
understand the perception and practices of the instructor as it related to encouraging students within their faith. Furthermore, these results were reflected upon the student’s own experience in determining whether or not these interactions actually served to contribute to these practices. The basis of this study was focused on the clear role that the instructor has within the online learning environment and whether the unique expressed goal of evangelical institution as it relates to spiritual development was being met through this avenue of engagement. The case study approach provided a more personal and up close representation of these interactions and provided a framework in which they took place.

The study indicated that there is in fact intentionality by the instructor to encourage students within matters of faith and this comes from both intentionality in their actions and a mindset focused upon ministry to the students. Furthermore, the study showed that when there is greater intentionality by the instructor that students expressed a greater connection to being encouraged in their faith within their online course experience. The goal of this research was to encourage greater instructor interaction within the course and to be intentionally focused on how students can be encouraged in their faith. As expressed by the instructors interviewed, the role of an instructor at an evangelical institution is much more than an occupation within higher education, it is a ministry.
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Appendix A

END OF COURSE SURVEY

The following questions are asked within the End of Course Survey. Questions 1 – 14 are answered on a 5 point Likert type scale. Question 15-18 are open ended in nature.

1. The faculty member responded to my questions in a timely manner (24-48 hours).
2. The faculty member provided interaction and responses in various communication forums throughout the course (email, phone calls, Discussion Boards, etc.)
3. The faculty member posted grades on assignments within one week of the project’s due date.
4. The faculty member provided quality and beneficial comments on written assignments.
5. The faculty member provided encouragement within his/her communications throughout the course.
6. Overall, the experience with this faculty member was positive.
7. The text(s) and course content provided me with the necessary information related to the course topics and objectives.
8. The text(s) and course content provided a good balance between theoretical and practical information.
9. The text(s) and course content were sufficient in preparing me for the learning activities and successful completion of assignments.
10. The assignment instructions gave clear expectations.
11. The amount of reading and number of assignments were appropriate for this course.
12. The course enabled me to develop a more complete Christian worldview.
13. The course enabled me to develop my communication skills.
14. The course enabled me to develop my critical thinking skills.
15. Please describe the strengths of the faculty member.
16. Please describe the recommendations you would suggest to improve the faculty member’s performance as an instructor.
17. Please describe the strengths of the course content.
18. Please describe the recommendations you would suggest to improve the course content.
Appendix B

INSTRUCTOR CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Instructor Perception and Experience within an Online Learning Environment
Joseph E. Butler
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study which will look at your perception and experience within an online learning environment. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an instructor for a required undergraduate course for non-religion majors. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Joseph Butler for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this research is to look at your experience within the online learning environment and specifically as it relates to spiritual development. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the facilitation of spiritual development and areas for further research.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask that you commit to an interview which would be focused on your role as an instructor. The interview would last approximately 30 min. - 1 hour and be recorded for transcription purposes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

Risks for this study are minimal as it is asking about your perception and experience as an instructor within an online course. All interactions and comments will be kept anonymous.

The benefits to participation include a greater understanding of the online learning environment. Your perception and experience is key to provide better understanding of the online learning environment and the interactions which ensue.

Compensation:

No compensation will be given for your participation in this study.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report published, information will not be included that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data collected will be saved in a password protected document. Pseudonyms will be assigned to the participants of the study and upon completion of the
compilation of data all files which include the original names will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with [this institution]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Joseph Butler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at xxx-xxx-xxxx. The contact information for Dr. Daniel Baer, advisor is the following: xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

*This email serves as a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

By responding to this email with my name inserted below, I have indicated that I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Please check one of the following:

___ I give my permission to be audio taped.
___ I do not give my permission to be audio taped.

Signature: ____________________________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Investigator:_______________________________ Date: ________________

**IRB Code Numbers:**

**IRB Expiration Date:**
Appendix C

STUDENT CONSENT FORMS

Consent Form – Online Survey

Instructor Interaction as It Relates to the Facilitation of Spiritual Development within an Evangelical Institution
Joseph E. Butler
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study which seeks to identify your experience in an online learning environment. You were selected as a possible participant as you have recently completed a required undergraduate course for non-religion majors. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Joseph Butler for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this research is to look at your experience within the online learning environment and specifically as it relates to spiritual development. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the facilitation of spiritual development and areas for further research.

This online survey seeks to understand your experience within the course and provides an opportunity to express your own personal insights. Furthermore, granting consent refers to this survey only. If you agree to be contacted for a potential follow up interview, a separate consent form will need to be completed for that portion of the study.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in the remainder of this study, you will be requested to complete the following:

1) Fill out the survey as contained within this form. The estimated time to complete this survey is 15 minutes.
2) Provide a complete response to the questions
3) Indicate whether you would participate in a follow up interview

The survey listed below should take approximately thirty minutes to complete. Furthermore, if you indicate that you are willing to take part in a follow up interview the time should last between fifteen to thirty minutes. If selected to take part in the follow up interview, you should be contacted within one to two weeks of completing this survey.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

Risks for this study are minimal as the questions seek to gauge your experience within the course and your overall perception. Contact will be limited to this survey unless you indicate that you are willing to take part in a follow up interview.
The benefits to participation include a greater understanding of the online learning environment. As an evangelical institution, it is pertinent to understand the role of spiritual development within the classroom and constructive interactions which are taking place. A student’s perspective would provide an understanding of how they have been affected by the course and the instructor.

Compensation:

No compensation will be given for your participation in this survey. However, if you are chosen to participate in a follow-up interview to this survey, then you will receive a $5 gift card to a choice of select vendors.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report published, information will not be included that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data collected will be saved in a password protected document. Pseudonyms will be assigned to the participants of the study and upon completion of the compilation of data all files which include the original names will be destroyed.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with [this institution]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Joseph Butler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at xxx-xxxx-xxxx. The contact information for Dr. Daniel Baer, advisor is the following: xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu.

This electronic agreement may be requested by emailing xxxxxxxx@liberty.edu or may be printed at this time for your record.

IRB Code Numbers:

IRB Expiration Date:

Electronic Consent: Please select your choice below.

Clicking on the “Agree” button below indicates that:
* You have read the above mentioned information
* You have voluntarily agree to participate in this study
* You are at least 18 years of age
If you decide that you do not want to participate in this study, please select the “Disagree” button below.

If you decide that you would like to participate in a potential follow-up interview to this study and an opportunity to receive a $5 gift card to a choice of select vendors, please email xxxxxx@liberty.edu to express your interest.

[“Agree” Toggle Button]
[“Disagree” Toggle Button]

[“Next” Toggle Button]
Appendix D

LETTER FOR PROVOST APPROVAL

Dr. [PROVOST OF THE INSTITUTION OF STUDY],

Good afternoon! My name is Joseph Butler and I am a faculty member with Liberty University Online, School of Religion. I am currently conducting a qualitative case study for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty University. The research has been approved by my doctoral committee through the School of Education.

The purpose of this email is to request permission to conduct the research as its focus will be here at [this institution] through the School of Religion. The purpose of the research is to identify various methods instructors are taking to help facilitate spiritual development, distinctive to the mission and purpose of evangelical institution, within an online environment and how students perceive this interaction. The title of the research project is “Instructor interaction as it relates to facilitate of spiritual development within an evangelical institution”.

The scope of the case study will review three required undergraduate courses for non-religion majors. The study will review courses which have recently been completed and will evaluate the various interactions taking place within the online learning environment. This will include access to course announcements, Discussion Board forums, feedback on grading, and general correspondence. An interview will be conducted with each of the instructors to understand their perceptions of online learning and the techniques that they identify that they have utilized. As well, an open ended survey will be sent to the students participating in that course to collect general perceptions as it relates to spiritual development. Students will also have the opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the facilitation of spiritual development and areas for further research.

The needs of this study upon the department will be access to the End of the Course Surveys in order to establish a potential participant pool for instructors, permission to contact the instructor and students to conduct interviews/survey, and access to Blackboard® for one course in which the instructor is facilitating. The instructor will be notified that this purpose of the study is to understand their perception and experience within an online course and access to the course will be gained independently of the instructor through the department.

As with case study research, my role will be as an observer to the various interactions which are taking place with minimal disruption to the course. All interactions and comments will be kept anonymous. The study will not only be beneficial to this university, but will provide further reflection for evangelical institutions conducting online learning.

Your approval of this research would be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions concerning the nature of the research or would like further clarification, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxx@liberty.edu. I have included a copy of the approved Proposal Defense for reference.
Thank you,

[EMAIL SIGNATURE]
Appendix E

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

May 18, 2013

Joseph E. Butler
IRB Approval 1593.052813: Case Study: Instructor Interaction as it Relates to the Facilitation of Spiritual Development in an Online Learning Environment

Dear Joseph,

We are pleased to inform you that your above study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

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.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB. and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

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

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix F

LETTER FOR INSTRUCTOR PARTICIPATION

Dr./Prof. [Faculty Member],

Good morning! My name is Joseph Butler and I am a faculty member with Liberty University Online, School of Religion. I am currently conducting a qualitative case study for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty University. As an instructor for a required undergraduate course for non-religion majors, I wanted to ask for your participation in this study.

The purpose of this research is to understand your perception and experience of an online course. This study will include not only your experience, but the student’s experience as well. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the facilitation of online courses and areas for further research.

An important aspect of this study is conducting an interview with you as the instructor to understand your perspective. The tasks requested from you as the instructor would be to agree to complete an interview which would be focused on your role as an instructor. The interview would last approximately 30 min. - 1 hour.

All interactions and comments will be kept anonymous. Furthermore, the case study will consist of three different faculty members within the School of Religion and the corresponding students within one course in which you will have just recently completed.

Before you agree to participate in this study, I can confirm that:

- Permission has been given by the Provost and the School of Religion for this research to be carried out.
- Permission has been granted by the Institutional Review Board for this research to be carried out (IRB Approval [Identification Number for IRB]).
- Your anonymity will be maintained at all times and no comments will be directly ascribed to you by name.
- Upon completion of the research, you will be notified that the study has been completed and a copy of the research findings will be made available to you upon request.

Your participation in this research would be greatly appreciated. If you are willing to take part, please email me back at your earliest convenience. Once your confirmation has been received than a formal consent form will be sent to your email account.

If you have any questions concerning the nature of the research or would like further clarification, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

Thank you,
[Email Signature]

Student Consent Form – Follow Up Interview
You are invited to participate in a research study which seeks to identify your experience in an online learning environment. You were selected as a possible participant as you have recently completed a required undergraduate course for non-religion majors. Furthermore, as you indicated that you would like to be included in a potential interview, you have been contacted for further participation in this study. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Joseph Butler for the completion of the Doctor of Education degree through Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this research is to look at your experience within the online learning environment and specifically as it relates to spiritual development. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the facilitation of spiritual development and areas for further research.

This interview seeks to further understand your experience as indicated within the previously completed survey and provide further opportunity for reflection.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask that you commit to an interview which would be focused on your experience within the course. The interview would last approximately 30 min. - 1 hour and be recorded for transcription purposes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

Risks for this study are minimal as the interview portion of this study is seeking to understanding your perception and experience as a student within an online course. All interactions and comments will be kept anonymous.

The benefits to participation include a greater understanding of the online learning environment. As an evangelical institution, it is pertinent to understand the role of spiritual development within the classroom and constructive interactions which are taking place. A student’s perspective would provide an understanding of how they have been affected by the course and the instructor.

Compensation:

By agreeing to participate in this portion of the study, a follow-up interview, you will receive a $5 gift card to a choice of select vendors.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report published, information will not be included that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data collected will be saved in a password protected document. Pseudonyms will be assigned to the participants of the study and upon completion of the compilation of data all files which include the original names will be destroyed.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with [this institution]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Joseph Butler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at xxx-xxx-xxxx. The contact information for Dr. Daniel Baer, advisor is the following: xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

*This email serves as a copy of this information to keep for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:**

By responding to this email with my name inserted below, I have indicated that I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Please check one of the following:

___ I give my permission to be audio taped.
___ I do not give my permission to be audio taped.

Signature: ____________________________ Date: _______________

Signature of Investigator:__________________________ Date: ________________

**IRB Code Numbers:**

**IRB Expiration Date:**
Appendix G

INSTRUCTOR INTERVIEW GUIDE

This interview guide has been constructed in conjunction with various research as cited through Chapter 2: Literature Review as it relates to the instructor’s methodology and practice in the facilitation of spiritual development. The basic framework has been constructed based upon a dissertation study completed by Sites (2008), a compilation of various categories outlined within models of spiritual development (Hindman, 2002; Shore, 2007; Willet, 2010), and methods identified in previous studies which aided in the establishment of community as it relates to spiritual development (Hines, McGee, Waller & Waller, 2009). The questions developed specifically focus on the role of the instructor in facilitation spiritual development. After each question, a series of potential prompts have been listed to guide the direction of the interview.

1. Please tell me about your experience working at a Christian Institution
   a. What brought you to this institution?
   b. How would you describe your interactions with colleagues?
   c. How would you describe your interactions in general with students?
   d. How would you describe your understanding of the mission and purpose of the institution? Would you agree with this mission and purpose?

2. Please tell me about your experience with facilitating an online course.
   a. How does the online course compare/contrast with a residential course?
   b. How would you describe your satisfaction with facilitating an online course?
   c. How would you describe your level of academic engagement?
   d. How would you describe your level of spiritual engagement?

3. Please tell about your perception of spiritual development within an online course.
a. How would you describe the role of the instructor?

b. How would you describe the openness of students?

c. What steps could be taken to improve or damage this environment?

4. Please tell about your methods to encourage spiritual development within an online course.

   a. What techniques do you do well to help facilitate spiritual development?

   b. What techniques do you utilize which is beyond stated expectations?

   c. How would you describe student’s perceptions to your interactions?

   d. How would you describe your effectiveness in your interactions?

   e. How would you describe whether there was an adequate amount of interaction?

5. Please tell me how you feel that the completion of administrative duties and expectations as an instructor affect spiritual development within the online experience.

   a. What affect does successful completion of these items have upon the student’s experience?

   b. What affect does unsuccessful completion of these items have upon the student’s experience?

   c. How can these expectations have a positive or negative affect?

6. Please tell me about your own personal faith and personal growth.

   a. How does this impact your interactions with colleagues?

   b. How does this impact your interactions with students?

   c. Do you at times share specific testimony or experience within the online environment? Why or why not?

   d. How important would you describe the integration of faith and learning?
7. Please tell me about your experience of community within the online environment.
   
a. How would you describe the success of establishing community?
   
b. How would you describe your role within community?
   
c. What steps do you take to help establish community?
   
d. How would you describe the importance of community in relation to spiritual development? Is this reflective in the classroom?
   
8. Please tell me your thoughts on the importance of connecting academic and spiritual truth within the classroom.
   
a. How would you describe the level of importance?
   
b. How would you describe the steps that you take to encourage deeper understanding of spiritual truth?
   
c. How would you describe the level of importance that students place on connecting academic and spiritual truth?
   
d. How does grading and feedback have an effect upon this connection?
   
e. How would you describe the importance of Discussion Boards?
   
9. Please tell me what you perceive as the greatest difficulties with establishing an environment conducive to spiritual development?
   
a. How could the online environment be improved to facilitate spiritual development?
   
b. How could students be better prepared to take part in the facilitation of spiritual development?
   
c. How could your techniques be improved to facilitate spiritual development?
   
10. Please tell me whether you believe students were challenged within this course to
reevaluate their spiritual beliefs?

a. How would you describe any additional steps that could have been taken?

b. How would you describe any distractions which took place?
Appendix H

STUDENT OPEN ENDED SURVEY

Email Correspondence

Dear Student,

We need your help to understand your experience at Liberty University Online!

The course in which previously have been enrolled, [Course and Section Number]. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval [Identification Number for IRB]), which oversees research conducted through or by this university.

The purpose of this research is to determine the role of spiritual development within an online learning environment. In answering this question, the study will evaluate the course content, announcements, Discussion Board interactions, feedback from graded assignments, and course related questions. The concluding results of this study will help identify practices which are beneficial to the online learning environment and for further research.

There is one area that we do still need your help for this study. Please help us by taking the time to complete a brief open ended questionnaire that will give a better understanding of your experience.

All information, whether collected in an open ended survey or through observation, will be kept confidential; however, if you would not like to participate in this study, simply send an email to xxxxxx@liberty.edu and information regarding any interaction in which you are directly involved will not be included.

Note: Students who are chosen to participate in a follow-up interview to this survey will receive a $5 gift card to a choice of select vendors. Click below to access the survey and for your opportunity to sign up for a follow-up interview.

[Hyperlink to Online Survey]

If you have any questions concerning the nature of the research or would like further clarification, please feel free to contact me at xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

Thank you,

[Email Signature]

Online Survey

Dear Student,

Thank you for agreeing to help with this study as we try to better understand your experience at
Liberty University Online. This experience will be valuable for future students as online learning continues to grow.

Please take the time to complete the following questions as they will give us a better understanding of your experience. All information collected will be kept anonymous.

[Student Consent Form]

Demographic Information:
Please identify your gender:
   Male
   Female

Please identify how many classes have you taken at Liberty University Online:
   This is my first semester taking courses through Liberty University Online
   I have taken 2 – 6 courses through Liberty University Online
   I have taken 7 – 10 courses through Liberty University Online
   I have taken over 10 courses through Liberty University Online

Survey Questions:
Instructions: Please complete the following survey to the best of your ability and be as thorough as possible. Thank you for your feedback! It is greatly appreciated!

1. When choosing to attend this school did you know that it was a Christian University?
   a. If yes, was this an important factor? Why or why not?
   b. If no, would this have been an important factor? Why or why not?

2. What role do you feel that “growing spiritually” should play while completing your current degree?

3. How has the instructor encouraged you to evaluate your own spiritual beliefs or convictions through this course?

4. During this course, what steps did the Instructor take to share his or her faith?

5. Did the Instructor’s interaction make you feel comfortable or uncomfortable in regards to the discussion of spiritual beliefs? Why?

6. How has the instructor met, or failed to meet, your expectations in concern to spiritual guidance within the course?
7. Are there any other aspects of the course that has encouraged you to evaluate your own spiritual beliefs or convictions not mentioned in the above questions? Please describe.

Thank you for your participation in this survey. If you are interested in being contacted for a potential follow-up interview to this survey, please email xxxxxx@liberty.edu. Students who are chosen to participate will receive a $5 gift card to a choice of select vendors. The phone interview should last no more than 15 to 30 minutes.
Appendix I

INSTRUCTOR DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Debriefing Statement

Instructor Interaction as it Relates to the Facilitation of Spiritual Development within an Evangelical Institution

Joseph E. Butler
Liberty University
School of Education

You recently participated in a research study which looked at your perception and experience within an online learning environment. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an instructor for a required undergraduate course for non-religion majors. The purpose of this debriefing statement is to inform you that the true nature of the study or an aspect of the study was not previously disclosed to you.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to have a better understanding of instructor interaction as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual development within an evangelical institution. The study sought to answer the following questions: (1) How, if at all, do instructors contribute to the spiritual development of students in an online course at a distinctively evangelical institution?; (2) What is the students’ perception of how instructor interaction challenges their spiritual development at a distinctively evangelical institution?

Deceptive Element(s):

You were originally told that if you agreed to be in this study, I would ask you to participate in an interview which sought to identify your perception and experience within an online learning environment.

The true nature of the study/undisclosed aspect of the study was to understand your perception and experience as it related specifically to the facilitation of spiritual development. As well, students were asked about their experience with you as their instructor and how they were encouraged within this area. The course was reviewed to further substantiate these findings and identify any other practices employed which fostered a positive learning environment.

Reasons for Deception:

It was necessary to include the above-described deceptive element because the inclusion of this information may have affected your practices within the course or caused you to be more aware of various approaches utilized. It was imperative that the environment was not disturbed by initiating an inquiry which may consciously or unconsciously change your normal practices.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report published, information will not be included that will make it possible to identify a subject. Transcriptions will be made of all recorded interviews. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All data collected will be saved in a password protected document. Pseudonyms will be assigned to the participants of the study and upon completion of the compilation of data all files which include the original names will be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is Joseph Butler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxx@liberty.edu. The contact information for Dr. Daniel Baer, advisor is the following: xxx-xxx-xxxx or xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at xxxxxx@liberty.edu.

Thank you,

[Email Signature]
Appendix J

STUDENT INTERVIEW

Email Correspondence

Dear Student,

Thank you for your participation within this study and agreeing to take part in a follow up interview.

As previously indicated, the course in which you have been previously enrolled, [Course and Section Number], has been selected to participate in a study to review a portion of the online learning experience. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB Approval [Identification Number for IRB]), which oversees research conducted through or by this university.

As stated previously, the purpose of this study is to determine the role of spiritual development within an online learning environment. The interview portion of this study will seek to better understand your experience and perception within an online course. The interview would last approximately 30 min. – 1 hour. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be required.

Your continued participation in this research would be greatly appreciated. A link to the informed consent has been provided below for your review and pertains to the interview which will be conducted. At the end of the document, you will be able to indicate that you have read the consent form and would like to take part in the interview. If you choose to participate and take part in the interview process, you will receive a $5 gift card to a select vendor.

[Hyperlink to Consent Form]

If you have any questions concerning the nature of the research or would like further clarification, please feel free to contact me at xxxxx@liberty.edu.

Thank you,

[Email Signature]

Student Interview Guide

This interview guide has been constructed in conjunction with various research as cited through Chapter 2: Literature Review as it relates to the facilitation of spiritual. As well, it will correspond with the Instructor Interview guide created for this study and further reflection of the
open ended survey. After each question, a series of potential prompts have been listed to guide the direction of the interview.

1. How would you describe the importance of faith within your own life?
   a. How was the issue of faith a factor when choosing this institution?
   b. How would you describe how you have been challenged in regards to faith why attending this institution?

2. How would you describe the importance of faith within the classroom?
   a. How have you felt in concern to discussing these topics?
   b. How has the discussion of faith affected your academic experience?

3. Please tell me about your experience within this course.
   a. How would you describe your experience as it related to the subject matter?
   b. How would you describe your experience as it relates to issues of faith?
   c. How would you describe the integration of the subject matter and faith within the online classroom?
   d. How would you describe your overall experience?

4. Please tell me about your experience as it relates to the Instructor’s role within the classroom?
   a. How would you describe your satisfaction with facilitation of the online course?
   b. How would you describe the instructor’s role related to academic engagement?
   c. How would you describe the instructor’s role related to spiritual engagement?

5. Please tell about your perception of spiritual development within an online course.
   a. How would you describe the role of the instructor?
   b. How would you describe the openness of other students?
c. What steps could be taken to improve or damage this environment?

6. Please tell about how you believed the instructor encouraged spiritual development within the online course.
   a. What techniques did the instructor use to help facilitate spiritual development?
   b. How would you describe the instructor’s effectiveness within these interactions?

7. Please tell me about your experience of community within the online environment.
   a. How would you describe the sense of community within the classroom?
   b. How would you describe the importance of community within the online classroom?
   c. How were you encouraged or discouraged in your faith due to this community?
Appendix K

OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

The following guidelines have been established in order to accurately record the events which have taken place within this study. Basic structure of this Observation Protocol was drafted according to a sample provided by Mahoney (1997). Observations will be recorded based on the modular in which the event took place in conjunction with the corresponding course section. The form below will be utilized for the recording of said events.

Furthermore, five categories broad categories have been established for the recording of events. These include: 1) Completion of Administrative Duties and Expectations as an Instructor; 2) Sharing Personal Faith and Personal Growth; 3) Genuine expression of care for students, encouragement, extension of grace; 4) Expressions of one living out their Faith (Prayer, Bible Reading, Service, Church); 5) Connecting Academic Truth with Spiritual Truth. The categories defined are based upon models of spiritual development and related back to the role that the instructor plays in guiding students to growth (Hindman, 2002; Shore, 2007; Willet, 2010).

Course: _______________   Modular: ____________

Modular Context:
In a few sentences, describe the stated objectives for the modular and corresponding assignments
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

Identify overall impressions from this week’s assignments and corresponding instructor interaction
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

Modular Interactions:
Identify below the various interactions which took place according to the stated categories. Underneath identify general themes or practices seen from these interactions.

1) Completion of Administrative Duties and Expectations as an Instructor
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________
____________________________________________________

Identified Themes/Practices: ________________________________________
____________________________________________________
2) Sharing Personal Faith and Personal Growth

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Identified Themes/Practices: ______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

3) Genuine expression of care for students, encouragement, extension of grace

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Identified Themes/Practices: ______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

4) Expressions of one living out their Faith

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Identified Themes/Practices: ______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

5) Connecting Academic Truth with Spiritual Truth.

________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Identified Themes/Practices: ______________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

General Comments/Observations
Identify any additional information which would contribute to the overall interactions within the course. Specifically note any areas which relates to the facilitation of spiritual development.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________