A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE INSTRUCTORS OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AT CHRISTIAN INSTITUTIONS ACCREDITED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

by

Judy Arline Jowers

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The central theories guiding this study were reflective practice and transformative learning theory as they explore the relationship between experience and reflection. Since relatively few inquiries have been published on the ways in which seminary professors assist future religious leaders in the use of reflective practice, the central research question for this study was: How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment? Through a transcendental phenomenology involving the data collection methods of individual interviews and a focus group triangulated with letters to future theological educators, I described the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for a purposive sample of 13 instructors of online theological reflection employed by Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Data analysis yielded the four themes of time, relationships, experience, and space as well as the essence of teaching theological reflection online; this essence, or concise summary of teaching theological reflection online, was hospitality in cyberspace for the purpose of fostering discussions about theology and experience.

Keywords: reflective practice; Christian higher education; scholarship of teaching and learning; graduate theological education; theological reflection
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Judy Arline Jowers
Dedication

I dedicate this work to my God, my family, and all those who have contributed to my education.
Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the gracious assistance of my family, my dissertation committee, and my participants.
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American Nurses Association (ANA)
Association of Theological Schools (ATS)
Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)
National Association of Social Workers (NASW)
National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)
National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)
Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Reflection represents the concept of thinking about past, present, and future actions in a meaningful fashion to advance individuals, communities, and societies. One of the seminal texts on reflective practice, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Dewey, 1933), explicitly refers to thought processes and reflection that have been linked to critical thinking skills (Naber & Wyatt, 2014). While unbridled thoughts can spiral into rumination (Leigh & Bailey, 2013), the quiet spaces formed by unplanned events such as rainstorms (Webster-Wright, 2013) or routine chores such as commuting to and from work (Brown, McNeill, & Shaw, 2013) often create opportunities to consider actions and attitudes, and that process of constructively considering and examining thoughts and behaviors, formed the focus of my research. Specifically, I investigated the experience of seminary professors who have helped future religious leaders in cultivating the ability to reflect on their ministry by considering their theological beliefs, cultural contexts, religious traditions, and prior experiences.

This chapter begins by discussing the historical background of reflective practice, the social impact of reflective practitioners in the helping professions, and the theoretical frameworks employed by those who research reflective practice. It then presents my motivation for investigating reflective practice as well as my research paradigm and philosophical assumptions about epistemology, ontology, and axiology. Next, the chapter explains the problem in the current literature and the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study, which was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Finally, this chapter presents the potential gains in understanding for practitioners,
researchers, and theorists of reflective practice, the research questions and procedures for my study, the limitations and delimitations of this study, as well as the definitions of central ideas related to the research.

**Background**

Reflection is essential for those within the helping professions because reflection helps students learn from practicum experiences and assists credentialed professionals in continually developing to meet the ever-changing circumstances that they encounter in their workplace contexts (Dewey, 1938). Therefore, reflection has been recommended as a method for identifying problematic assumptions within and subsequently transforming the contexts in which professionals practice (Clark, Brown, & Jandildinov, 2016; Wibberley & Murphy, 2016) as well as a method for preventing burnout (Gubi, 2016) through the development of resilience (Leroux & Théorêt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Grant, Kinman, & Alexander, 2014), and self-care (Doehring, 2013). Because reflection serves as a means of continually developing and transforming professionals and their surrounding sociocultural contexts, numerous organizations require students to be trained in reflective practice. For example, reflection is regarded as a necessary competence for credentialed educators (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008), nurses (American Nurses Association, 2015), social workers (National Association of Social Workers, 2012, 2013), and religious leaders (Association of Theological Schools, 2015c). Throughout this and other chapters, I am including religious leaders within the overarching category of the helping professions, because pastors, social workers, teachers, and nurses often are characterized as belonging to this category (Carroll, 2014); however, I acknowledge that pastors serve in a field dependent on the supernatural realm that is frequently unacknowledged in other fields classified as professional (Piper, 2013).
Historical Overview

Reflective practice and theological reflection have moved from a focus on the product of reflection on action to an emphasis on the centrality of reflection in and with practice to achieve an authentic praxis that embodies professional values in interactions with others. Early theorists of reflective practice such as Dewey (1933) began by focusing on cognitive operations occurring after professional encounters whereas subsequent theorists such as Schön (1983) and van Manen (2015) portrayed reflection as a more holistic activity involving mind, body, affect, and social interactions. Likewise, theological reflection began as an intellectual process occurring after embodied pastoral action (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995) but later developed into an emotional and social event occurring during ministry practice (Anderson, 2001; Killen & de Beer, 1994). The below sections provide further details on the development of both reflective practice and theological reflection.

Reflective practice. Reflective practice has developed from a cognitive consideration of past events to an embodied and intuitive awareness of the relational nature of professional practice. Dewey (1933) originally conceived of reflection as an application of the scientific method within the teaching profession to develop instructional techniques through evidence (Dimova & Kamarska, 2015). In contrast, Schön (1983) developed an intuitive theory of reflection that emphasized reflection as a process integrated with action (i.e., reflection-in-action) to avoid the indiscriminate application of technical skills in potentially inappropriate contexts. Numerous models subsequently were designed to help students develop reflective abilities (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 2014), but such models have been disparaged as forms of surveillance that promote conformity rather than critical analysis (Kelsey & Hayes, 2015; McGarr & McCormack, 2014; Ross, 2014a, 2014b). Consequently, van Manen (1977, 2015),
who began writing about reflection nearly 40 years ago, has reiterated the importance of embodied reflection that occurs within professional encounters and that acknowledges the importance of the relationship between the practicing professional (e.g., the teacher) and the client (e.g., the student) in shaping a truly reflective (tactful) response. Van Manen’s (2015) pedagogical tact echoed his description of teaching as an inherently moral act (van Manen, 1991) involving the ethical decisions of the teacher, as well as Dunne’s (1993, 2005) insistence that the ethical character of helping professionals be considered since a profession cannot be made “practitioner-proof” (Dunne, 2005, p. 375) and thereby eliminate the influence of professionals on their practice.

Therefore, recent research on educational settings has focused on the transformative process of reflection rather than the completed product of reflection. When viewed as a process, reflection better represents the awareness of situation and dialogic interaction with settings required for ongoing development through reflection on experience for transformation as discussed by van Manen (2015) in his work on pedagogical tact. Griffith, Bauml, and Barksdale (2015), for example, investigated the behavior of preservice teachers in their field placement settings as they made decisions concerning reading instruction made while teaching in the classroom such as discussing the definition of words deemed important to comprehension and correcting reading errors in their students. By examining the articulated thought processes of these student teachers, Griffith et al. (2015) were able to portray, as did Schön (1983) in his vignette of architectural design decisions, a representation of the thought processes of professionals in action. Similarly, Stahl, Sharplin, and Kehrwald (2016), in their research involving real time feedback delivered through a wireless earpiece to preservice teachers during simulated classroom experiences, created opportunities for the teachers to adjust their teaching
practice to the needs of their students. For example, one student received feedback through the earpiece to ensure that she was focusing on the whole class, rather than an individual student, to avoid losing the attention of the whole class whom she was instructing. Recent research with reflective practitioners has echoed this emphasis on reflection as situational awareness of clients and their reactions. For instance, educators who possess an attentiveness to classroom occurrences that makes the resources of one’s experiences flexibly available” (Dunne, 1993, p. 305); practicing speech language pathologists describing reflection as “being in the moment” (Caty, Kinsella, & Doyle, 2016, p. 538) with patients and responding to nonverbal cues, such as clinched fists or rolling of the eyes; and “being reflective” (Francis, 2018, p. 191) in ministry have been portrayed as relating experience as it happens to personal and theological beliefs. This presence or awareness within a situation may differ from traditional notions of reflection limited to unexpected events that require consideration (Schön, 1983) and may be aligned much more closely with van Manen’s (2015) concept of pedagogical tact and Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning, which alters beliefs used to interpret everyday circumstances. Consequently, the theoretical framework for my research integrates both Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) but draws on the continuous reflection and transformation associated with van Manen (2015) and Mezirow (1990, 1991).

**Theological reflection.** Theological reflection originally was portrayed as an interpretation or consideration of life *vis à vis* Scripture, but more recently has been conceptualized as a conversation between the sacred and the secular, as well as an embodied practice in which reflection and action are intertwined inextricably. Early Christian writers – such as Augustine, Gregory, Anselm, and Ignatius – sought to examine and better understand their lives through reflection on Scripture and prayer (Dallas, 2017; Graham, Walton, & Ward,
2005, 2007; Nash, 2011; Thompson, Pattison, & Thompson, 2008), as epitomized in Anselm’s phrase, “faith seeking understanding” (Thompson et al., 2008, p. 19). Subsequent theorists of theological reflection have widened the sources for theological reflection to include pastoral experience (Boisen, 1946, 1960; Porter, 2015; Stone & Duke, 2013), reason in the Wesleyan Quadrilateral (Hey, 2018; Outler, 1985; Thorsen, 2005), and culture (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995; Graham et al., 2005, 2007), as well as other elements of ministry context (Bevans, 2002), emotions or images (Johnson, 2004; Killen & de Beer, 1994), embodied or sensory experiences (Peckruhn, 2017), the Holy Spirit in Lawson’s (1997) development of Stackhouse’s (1996, 2008) tetralectic for ethical decisions, non-Christian faith traditions (Foley, 2014), values derived from Scriptural texts that are palatable to an interfaith community (Paterson & Kelly, 2013) and academic disciplines such as quantum physics (Jasper & Wright, 2016), Mandelbrot sets (Jung, 2015b), or evolutionary biology (Atwaters, Park-Hearn, & Salazar, 2017; Franklin, 2017).

Scholars also have emphasized the importance of ensuring that theology is exemplified in pastoral praxis (Graham, 2002) with terms such as orthopraxis (Kinast, 1983), Christopraxis (Anderson, 2001; Root, 2014) and operative (Ault, 2013; Paver, 2006), incarnational (Landau, Brazil, Kaasalainen, & Crawshaw, 2013), or practical theology (Osmer, 2008). As in other helping professions, theological reflection currently is viewed as a process that cannot and should not be separated artificially from the lived experience of professional practice or the character of the practitioner.

Social Impact

Reflective practice helps students develop their chosen vocations’ professional attributes, continually develop throughout their careers, transform current or future professional contexts, and better meet the needs of those whom they hope to serve. The cultivation of professional
attributes in training programs is crucial for maintaining continuity across programs within diverse institutional settings, and the ability to respond appropriately to unforeseen changes in workplace settings through reflection represents a significant contribution to lifelong development in the helping professions. Similarly, preparing helping professionals who can advance their workplaces and surrounding cultures while simultaneously meeting individual clients’ needs underscores the appreciation for and centrality of reflective practice in many preparation programs.

**Professional attributes.** During professional training programs, students learn to exemplify, through reflection, the professional attributes outlined by their accrediting organizations. For instance, reflective learning experiences have allowed preservice teachers to consider ways to treat all students fairly and equitably (LaBelle & Belknap, 2016; NCATE, 2008), future social workers to demonstrate respect for all people in their interactions with service users (NASW, 2008; Testa & Egan, 2015), preregistration nurses to exemplify an ethic of care in their interactions with patients (ANA, 2015; Knutsson, Jarling, & Thorén, 2015; Schwind, Santa-Mina, Metersky, & Patterson, 2015), future doctors to become more aware of their vocational commitment by reflecting on their faith through the Ignatian *examen* (Wasson et al., 2015), and future religious leaders to integrate faith with their ministerial practice (Association of Theological Schools, 2015c; Heywood, 2013; Payne, 2008). Therefore, reflection represents one of the central ways in which higher education institutions cultivate future helping professionals who apply their knowledge and skills in a manner consistent with their professions’ espoused values and norms as part of a deliberately developed habitus (Bourdieu, 1990; Farley, 1983; Fataar & Feldman, 2017; O’Connor, 2007).

**Lifelong development.** Reflection not only cultivates professional dispositions, but also
helps individuals learn from workplace experiences to develop throughout their working lives continually. Lifelong learning for continuing professional development has become a primary concern for supranational agencies, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (1996, 2000), as well as national governments, such as that of Australia, which established the Vocational Education and Training Initiative (Department of Industry, 2014). Ongoing development of the workforce increasingly has become important as industrialized nations endeavor to maintain the abilities of an aging workforce that remains employed for increasingly longer periods of time and encounters significant changes within the workplace, including technological advances, as well as an increasing emphasis on collective competence, requiring employees to be evaluated as groups, rather than individuals, and to utilize soft skills that they may or may not have acquired while pursuing their initial qualifications (Billett, Dymock, & Choy, 2016). Furthermore, many industrialized countries are placing greater emphasis on college graduates’ initial and continuing employability, given their role in fulfilling national social and economic goals, e.g., caring for an aging population, providing the necessary taxation base required for current public policies, and repaying student loans contracted by those attending higher education institutions not fully funded by the government (Billett et al., 2016).

Despite the importance of lifelong learning in sustaining an effective workforce, many small and medium-size employers do not provide their workers with continuing education yet expect employees to pursue ongoing development with personal resources (Billett et al., 2016).

Furthermore, employers who do provide continuing education often dispense this training at their discretion, which potentially can harm those not deemed worthy of such training (Billett, 2015c; Wheeler, 2017). Consequently, the somewhat-haphazard nature of current lifelong learning provisions, combined with the significance of lifelong development for an aging workforce
operating within a continually changing workplace seeking to fulfill national economic and public policy goals, represents a central concern for many employees, employers, and governmental organizations.

Reflection, moreover, plays an essential role in lifelong learning, given its prominence in initial and ongoing qualification programs, as well as its potential for cultivating collective and individual work-related learning across a variety of occupational settings. In initial training programs, reflection has been introduced across disciplines and years of programs to cultivate the skill of lifelong learning because “meta-reflexivity [i.e., deliberating about the most appropriate actions for the self as a responsible and embedded member of a society] is the key to lifelong learning” (Ryan, 2015, p. 7). For example, frameworks for reflection can be inserted through learning management systems and common scaffolds, such as Ryan’s (2015) Four R’s – reporting, relating, reasoning, and reconstructing – across university programs and, likewise, blended with work-integrated learning opportunities in foundation programs, as well as cooperative education experiences and apprenticeships (Billett, 2015a). These reflective skills, acquired through higher education, then can be used to engage actively with workplace experiences, because reflection is the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (Dewey, 1933, p. 6). Additionally, Billett’s (2014) socio-personal theory of work-integrated learning requires consideration of both an individual’s active participation in learning as well as input from others and thereby draws on Schutz’s (1970) phenomenological understanding of social relations. Such reflection on workplace experiences meets the preferences of many employees and vocational education and training professionals, who prefer that learning be rooted in actual occupational settings, rather than relegated to third-
party training programs or higher education classrooms (Billett et al., 2016). Consequently, reflection, introduced in initial training programs and continued throughout work life, represents one viable method of continuing education to learn from occupational experiences and fulfill the ideal of forming workplaces in which “work is learning” (Billett et al., 2016, p. 269).

Furthermore, reflection can help cultivate collective and individual learning within the workplace to draw on colleagues’ knowledge and skills, as well as adapt to the changing needs of workplaces and problematic circumstances or procedures found within these workplaces. Collaborative reflection can help decrease the plague of “collective incompetence” (Billett et al., 2016, p. 58), existing alongside individual competence through, for example, dialogue between pharmacists and doctors concerning appropriate prescribing choices (Billett et al., 2016), or social workers regarding potential risks associated with suicidal tendencies in clients (Avby, 2015). Collective dialogue on workplace experiences is especially helpful for isolated professionals, such as rural or solo general practitioners, who often choose continuing education opportunities based on personal interests, rather than documented deficiencies (Billett et al., 2016), as well as for those in high-stress situations (Billett et al., 2016), as many professionals have expressed difficulty remembering details, e.g., on simulated teaching experiences (Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Likewise, collective reflection on errors is essential to avoiding their replication, especially within settings such as healthcare organizations, in which patient injuries or deaths sometimes are caused by communication or prescribing errors (Billett et al., 2016). Individual reflection also can foster learning within occupational settings to adapt to the flux that exists within modern societies and that necessitates continual metamorphosis. For instance, professionals, through deliberate reflection, can construct meanings from workplace experiences (Allen, 2000, 2014; Moon, 2000, 2010) and, when necessary, reconstruct these meanings by
adopting alternative perspectives on such situations by considering, for example, unpleasant experiences from the patient’s, rather than the healthcare provider’s, perspective (Bolton, 2014). Additionally, reflection can help working professionals develop resilience (Leroux & Théorêt, 2014) and, thus, maintain a sustainable work-life balance (Kaunisto et al., 2013; Doehring, 2013) to avoid the perils of attrition and burnout prevalent in the fields of education (Clandinin et al., 2015; Kaunisto et al., 2013), nursing (Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2016), social work (McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2015), and ministry (Adams, Hough, Proeschold-Bell, Yao, & Kolkin, 2016; Elkington, 2013). Moreover, reflection can help professionals adapt their services to the needs of increasingly diverse co-workers (Billett et al., 2016), students (Adie & Tangen, 2015; Ryan, 2015; Ryan & Ryan, 2013; Smagorinsky, Shelton, & Moore, 2015; Vaughn, 2015), patients (Taylor, Sims, & Hill, 2015), and congregations (Beach, 2011b; Studebaker & Beach, 2014; van den Toren & Hoare, 2015). The ability to reflect on and learn from workplace experience is becoming increasingly important, not only due to changes within the workplace, but also given the scarcity of opportunities for reflection, as the settings in which helping professionals operate often are driven by administrative protocols that emphasize efficiency (Meierdirk, 2016), conformity (Smagorinsky et al., 2015), “functional stupidity” (Billett et al., 2016, p. 87), or mindless fulfillment of established routines (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012) within a culture of busyness (Avby, 2015; Campling, 2016; Nutt & Keville, 2016; O’Brien, 2016, 2018; Webster-Wright, 2013), leaving little time for meaningful deliberation and debriefing. Similarly, rapid changes within available employment opportunities sometimes require individuals to reshape their vocational narratives to meet increasingly common insecurities in the job market by rewriting the stories of their careers to serve others in hitherto-unimagined manners (Lengelle & Ashby, 2017; Lengelle, Meijers, Poell, & Post, 2013). Therefore, reflection allows professionals
to draw on colleagues and experiences within employment settings to develop and meet changing demands on themselves and their employers continually, as well as to change, when necessary, the stories and meanings inherent in their vocational trajectories.

**Transformation of professional contexts.** Specific examples from research on reflective practice also have illustrated the importance of cultivating helping professionals who can transform their current or future practice settings through reflection. For instance, Waters, Altus, and Wilkinson (2013) found that teaching social work interns to consider positive aspects of their field placements allowed them to mirror these practices with clients. As one intern explained, she focused on the positive traits that a mother living in a shelter had fostered in her child to encourage this mother to use positive disciplinary techniques rather than the loud, somewhat-upsetting techniques she previously employed in the shelter. By mirroring the reflective technique learned in the classroom, this intern transformed, albeit to a limited extent, the atmosphere within this shelter for victims of domestic abuse. Similarly, Burr, Blyth, Sutcliffe, and King (2016) noted that social workers who analyzed their personal values prior to entering field contexts were able to understand, for example, adverse emotional reactions to practices observed in field placement settings, such as an overemphasis on financial gains and losses to the detriment of service users’ needs. Finally, future youth ministers involved in research by Corrie (2013) began to appreciate the difficulty and importance of abstaining from the pervasive consumer culture, in which they and the youths whom they will serve reside. During the liturgical season of Lent, these youth ministers chose to refrain from a consumer practice, such as purchasing prepared foods, to provide themselves with the opportunity to prepare food at home with their families, then subsequently reflected on their experiences in writing and in group discussions. Thus, the fasting exercises equipped them to disciple Christ-centered, rather
than consumer-centered young people who likewise could help transform others and their surrounding culture. These examples, drawn from the social work and ministry fields, have highlighted reflection’s power to aid future helping professionals in influencing their current and future practice settings through meaningful consideration of experiences completed as part of their professional preparation.

**Better serve clients.** Reflection also has aided future and practicing helping professionals in preparing to respond appropriately to clients’ potentially offensive behaviors, as well as address dying patients and their families’ spiritual concerns. Tomlin, Hines, and Sturm (2016) allowed future health care workers to consider appropriate reactions to potentially upsetting situations described in vignettes of visits to homes with new mothers. For instance, students were asked to imagine suitable reactions to a mother who displayed anger at her baby for spitting up on her clothing, such as speaking with the mother about all infants’ tendency to perform this behavior and, thus, avoiding overt signs of displeasure that potentially may damage their relationship with the mother. Likewise, Kuczewski et al. (2014) asked medical students to reflect on experiences in addressing the spiritual concerns of patients who died and found that these students realized patients and their families’ spiritual needs, but frequently rationalized neglecting spiritual concerns by viewing such matters as other staff members’ responsibility or simply waiting until they were transferred to another department on their clinical rotation so that they could cease thinking about such patients and their needs. After engaging in reflection, many of these students expressed a desire to remain sensitized to their own emotions about patients’ impending deaths, as well as those of the patient and their families, to foster holistic patient care that included discussions about spiritual services available through hospital chaplains.

Additionally, reflection has enabled in-service teachers to modify their questioning
strategies to align with their professed educational philosophies, and social workers to care for themselves, as well as their clients, properly. For example, Farrell and Mom (2015) asked Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESOL) to reflect on their beliefs about suitable questioning techniques, such as comprehension checks and solicitation of students’ opinions or feelings. Farrell (2016) then reviewed, with the teachers, transcribed recordings of the strategies that they utilized with their students in the classroom, thereby enabling them to better align their professed beliefs about questioning strategies with their classroom practices. Similarly, Wong (2013) utilized contemplative activities, such as mindful eating or walking, to help social workers develop awareness of personal and professional contexts. Through these mindfulness activities, one student adjusted her self-care habits (e.g., by beginning to eat more slowly) and, thus, became better able to care for not only her own needs, but also those of her clients, including a woman who needed a space heater due to substandard housing arrangements. Consequently, reflection has allowed helping professionals to serve their clients in a manner consistent with their personal and professional standards of practice.

**Theoretical Overview**

My research was guided by the theories of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). The literature on reflective practice has been criticized for inappropriately separating reflection and action (Collin, Karsenti, & Komis, 2013; Hébert, 2015; Leigh, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013), as well as neglecting the ethical and theoretical concerns necessary for reflection (Kreber, 2015). My research sought to address these concerns by emphasizing reflection as the process by which professionals transform themselves and their contexts to achieve existentially authentic practice. Prior scholarship on Christian higher education (Foote, 2015; Porter, 2013) and ministerial
training programs (Cronshaw & Menzies, 2015), likewise, has blended transformative learning theory with reflective practice to illustrate reflection’s impact on experience to transform interpretive paradigms and operative theologies. Moreover, scholars of theological education (Beach, 2011b; Farley, 1983; Lamport, 2010; Maddox, 1990; Naidoo, 2015; Wong, 2016b) repeatedly have emphasized the importance of cultivating religious leaders who routinely integrate theology with practice and, thus, develop an authentic praxis that expresses their professed theologies. Additionally, theoretical texts on reflection have highlighted prospective transformation through reflective writing and similar representations, such as sculpture, which continually shape and reshape meanings derived from experience (Moon, 2000, 2010; Moon & Fowler, 2008). Van Manen’s (2015) description of reflective practice as a type of in situ awareness and Webster-Wright’s (2013) existentially authentic practice, as well as Marcel’s (1995) notion of disponibilité (engaged and thoughtful action as a form of Christian service), likewise, require continual reflection for genuine practice in accord with espoused values. Therefore, my research sought to unite the theories of reflective practice and transformative learning by highlighting reflective practice’s role in the process of continual transformation for theologically authentic professional practice.

**Situation to Self**

The below sections contextualize my research by explaining my motivation for conducting the study, my views on empirical research, and my philosophical assumptions about reality, knowledge, and morality. Such knowledge helps readers of qualitative research better discern any potential biases and facilitates comparisons of findings from various perspectives. Creswell (2013) acknowledged research design’s impact on empirical investigations, given the relationship between the researcher’s worldview, the framing of research problems, and the
appropriate evaluation of any findings derived from the research. Consequently, the sections below attempt to make my study more meaningful by candidly outlining possible influences on my research findings due to my philosophical outlook and sociocultural setting.

**Motivation**

I wanted to research reflective practice because I have benefitted from reflection, and I view reflection as becoming increasingly important not only for those affiliated with theological schools, but also for those living in modern societies. Scripture alludes to the practice of reflection by encouraging individuals and groups to consider and converse prior to and following significant decisions or events (Luke 2:19; Matthew 1:20; Psalm 4:4, 119:9; Proverbs 11:14, 15:22). Through such consideration, reflection has allowed me to develop continually as an educator in the K-16 public and private education sectors, and as a children’s minister over the past 12 years. I am interested specifically in theological reflection because I have benefited from connecting secular subjects, such as classical mythology, to earthbound humans’ ability to understand aspects of divine truth, as illustrated in the tale of Endymion (Brumble, 1998), or connecting the idea of a loving God to the laws of physics, through which we can manipulate the material world (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2016, 2017; Atwaters et al., 2017; Franklin, 2017; Poythress, 2006). Likewise, theological reflection on ministry and teaching experiences has helped me appreciate that God often uses denominations (Taylor, 2015), congregations (Clarke, 2015; Park, 2012), communities (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995), and classrooms (van Manen, 2015) in which lay or ordained clergy and educators are placed to help them realize Scriptural truths, such as forgiveness and unconditional love. Furthermore, theologically reflective dialogues rooted in students’ present contexts (Cartwright, 2017; Lowe & Lowe, 2010, 2013, 2018) may become a recommended or required component of ATS distance
education programs, given reflection’s role in professional formation (Bentley & Buchanan, 2017; Brown, 2016; Groom, 2017; Heywood, 2013; Hockridge 2013, 2015; Le Cornu, 2006; Wong, 2011) and the centrality of grounding such reflection within theology to avoid further rupturing the currently splintered soulscape that artificially divides religion and spirituality (Ault, 2013). Finally, like other scholars (Mann, 2017; Mudge, 2018; Senechal, 2011), I am concerned with the increasing number of distractions, such as audiovisual ads broadcast at gasoline pumps (Gas Station TV, 2017), which seem to deter reflection and eerily resemble the squeal incessantly streamed into the ears of citizens in Orwell’s (1949) authoritarian society. By investigating the instruction of reflective practice, I hope to equip others with information that may help them train others more effectively on how to think about professional practice in a society permeated by diversions, and by focusing on theological reflection, I hope to enrich the current discussion on reflective relationships’ role in ATS-accredited institutions offering fully or partially online degrees (ATS, 2018c).

Research Paradigm

My research paradigm was that of critical realism, which blends a realist ontology with a constructivist epistemology, thereby maintaining that a single reality exists, but that individuals construe this reality in varying ways (Bhaskar, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Maxwell, 2012, 2015; Smith, 2011). Along with “critical realism” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 109), this paradigm also has been termed “subtle realism” (Seale, 1999, p. 470), “naïve realism” (Logue, 2012, p. 211), or “new realism” (Wetherell & Still, 1996, p. 99), as it represents a middle ground between realism and relativism (Finlay, 2006, 2012). As Gorski (2013) explained, critical realism acknowledges the distinction “between a natural world as it really is and our changing concepts of it” (p. 664), so that an ontological realist can maintain that an objective world exists while simultaneously
insisting that human understandings of this natural world perpetually will be inadequate and limited. Critical realism also acknowledges the reality of ideas that can be perceived and established only through means other than sciences rooted solely in the material world. Gorski (2013) explained that the act of writing highlights the role of disciplines other than the physical or natural sciences: “It is true that the path of my pen does not violate any laws of physics. But it is not determined by any either” (p. 665). Bhaskar (2008) made a similar observation, albeit in more poetic language, by explaining that human experience is perceived as “a crisscross world of zebras and zebra-crossings” (p. 95), i.e., a world that contains the “four planes … (a) of material transactions with nature; (b) of inter-personal intra- or inter-action; (c) of social relations; and (d) of intra-subjectivity” (Bhaskar, 1993, p. 153), and Budd (2012) similarly noted that “human action cannot be reduced to stimuli and responses, solely physical reactions, or unconscious behavior” (p. 74).

Because critical realism acknowledges the role of sciences that examine immaterial entities in the social sciences, including those that can be analyzed only in the minds of one or more humans, Budd (2012) was drawn to integrating critical realism and phenomenology in research concerning information science and instructional practices within this field. Phenomenologists, like critical realists, seek to allow the natural and physical sciences to exist alongside the sciences that examine the realms of human consciousness, philosophy, culture, and social interactions (Merleau-Ponty, 1964; Smith, 2011). To ensure that their conclusions are justified, phenomenologists discuss their perceptions with those of others, thereby achieving an “intersubjective harmony of validity” (Husserl, 1970, p. 163). Budd (2012) compared such discourse to observing the moon “in a variety of ways, at a variety of times, from a variety of perspectives” (Budd, 2012, p. 71). The reliability of knowledge obtained through these social
interactions, likewise, has been defended by Elder-Vass (2012a, 2012b). Such knowledge is limited by the humans constructing these ideas, as well as the everchanging, or “plastic” (Budd, 2012, p. 71), nature of human perceptions and ideas for both critical realists (Mingers, Mutch, & Willcocks, 2013) and phenomenologists (Budd, 2012). This grounding of critical realism in claims established through mutual discourse, which is limited necessarily by the humans involved in the discourse, as well as critical realism’s acknowledgement of truths that may be perceived only psychologically or cognitively, led me to choose the transcendental phenomenology method.

Transcendental phenomenology focuses on descriptions of participants’ lived experiences as conveyed in their own words – words that may vary depending on the individual participants, yet reflect a shared, common experience distilled through phenomenological reduction to the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The pursuit of such an underlying, albeit imperfect, essence would be futile if the participants and researcher did not participate in a shared reality that possessed at least some similar characteristics, as required by my adherence to a realist ontology. Nonetheless, the shared essence of an experience distilled in transcendental or descriptive phenomenology (Finlay, 2012) necessarily is fallible, given the constraints of human perception, combined with the inevitable interpretation of perceptions and their descriptions (Finlay, 2012; Vagle, 2014), as necessitated by my constructivist epistemology. Although I conducted transcendental phenomenology that describes, rather than interprets, participants’ experiences, my adherence to a constructivist epistemology acknowledged that the participants’ perceptions, as well as my analysis of these perceptions, was necessarily less than perfect and could attempt to describe only a shared perception of experience, rather than a definitive portrayal of the experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment (Finlay,
I chose the transcendental or descriptive phenomenological method (Finlay, 2012; Moustakas, 1994), rather than an interpretive or hermeneutic phenomenological method (van Manen, 1997a, 1997b), because I believe that description, however limited in nature, should precede an interpretation of it. Consequently, the method of transcendental or descriptive phenomenology seemed acceptable, as it corresponded with my beliefs about the existence of a somewhat comprehensible reality constrained by a humanly constructed and thereby necessarily imperfect knowledge of this reality.

Moreover, other research studies on the topic of reflective practice within higher education also have employed the method of descriptive or transcendental phenomenology (Finlay, 2012). For example, Peabody and Noyes (2017) utilized Moustakas’ (1994) method while studying occupational therapy students, and Clarke (2014) applied Giorgi’s (1985) technique with nursing students. Additionally, Moustakas (1994) designed the transcendental method to portray the shared experience of a group of individuals and illustrated transcendental phenomenology as a method of inquiry for educational research by describing the experience of an instructor interacting with a student “begging” (p. 96) him for approval and affirmation, in their research on teaching reflective practice. Finally, the philosophical underpinnings of Moustakas’ (1994) method allowed for communication, as well as other social relations, to be viewed as how instructors and teachers can influence one another’s constructions of reality (Creely, 2018; Marques & Martino, 2017; Rasmussen, 1998). Therefore, I chose to answer my central research question concerning the lived experience of a group of instructors using the transcendental phenomenology method.

**Ontological, Epistemological, and Axiological Assumptions**

My research paradigm and central research question flowed from my views as an
evangelical Thomist (Geisler, 2003) or Christian Aristotelian (Muller, 1998, 2001). While I believe that all human knowledge is, at least in some respects, finite and fallible, I also believe that God, who is the source of all being and knowledge, including knowledge of aesthetics and ethics, has endowed humans with rational, emotional, and spiritual abilities that allow them to discern, to a limited degree, natural and supernatural truths as manifested in His word (i.e., Scripture) and His world (i.e., the physical realm). Although all human knowledge is incomplete and at some level imperfect, I maintain that belief in a benevolent creator, who encourages His human creatures to act in an orderly fashion and who is said to be the author of order rather than confusion (1 Corinthians 14:33), can be relied upon to provide a world in which certain principles and patterns underlying the creation can be discerned so that His creatures can better serve Him and comprehend His divine nature. To understand these principles governing the creation, humans interact with divine and sentient beings (e.g., humans or other animals), places, and things to discern meanings through verbal and nonverbal forms of communication. Consequently, I am a constructivist in epistemology but a realist in ontology and axiology so can be categorized as a critical realist (Bhaskar, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Maxwell, 2012, 2015). I therefore chose transcendental phenomenology as my research method, because this method allowed me to discern a shared essence or understanding of the lived experience of the participants that is recognizable to others (Creely, 2018; van Manen & Adams, 2010) and thereby reflected my ontological belief that humans can discern remnants of the underlying structures imbued in experiences of the created world. Furthermore, transcendental phenomenology acknowledges that the shared understandings gleaned from phenomenological research are necessarily limited by the lifeworlds of the participants and researcher (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen & Adams, 2010), because both the participants and the researcher, despite
epoché (Vagle, 2014), have constructed their understandings of experience through interactions with their external surroundings as well as the preconceptions that they bring to these experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, transcendental phenomenology acknowledges the role of social relationships and interactions in influencing the lifeworld perspectives of both instructors and learners verbal and nonverbal forms of communication (Creely, 2018; Marques & Martino, 2017; Rasmussen, 1998) so that educational phenomena that rely on communication through, for example, instructor-student interactions, which formed the focus of my central research question as framed from the perspective of the instructors, could meaningfully be investigated through Moustakas’s (1994) method of transcendental phenomenology.

**Problem Statement**

Reflection is included in professional standards for educators, health care professionals, social workers, and religious leaders (American Nurses Association, 2015; Association of Theological Schools, 2015c; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008; National Association of Social Workers, 2012). However, current literature has noted many difficulties in teaching reflection, including a lack of a clear definition (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Rose, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013; Wilson, 2013), inauthentic reflections prompted by fears of judgment by instructors (Binks, Jones, & Knight, 2013) or peers (Testa & Egan, 2015), and the influence of culture (Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016; Wanda, Fowler, & Wilson, 2016; Zhan & Wan, 2016). While the education and healthcare fields have warranted literature reviews on the teaching of reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Dubé & Ducharme, 2015; Standal & Moe, 2013), instruction in theological reflection is represented by a handful of studies that present the perspectives of online students (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014) or residential instructors (Mallaby &
Tan, 2018; Wong, 2009) and students (Wong, 2016a). Therefore, the problem was that teaching others to be reflective practitioners is both necessary and challenging for those who prepare future helping professionals, and this transcendental phenomenological study, which presented the lived experiences of 13 instructors of theological reflection in the online environment employed by Christian schools accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, enriched the existing literature that has not considered their voices sufficiently.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. At the stage of the research, theological reflection was understood as the use of Scripture, reason, and tradition, as well as family and community cultures when considering prior events and preparing for future action (Austin, 2017; Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Floding, 2017; Hey & Roux, 2012; Kroning, 2016; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995). The central theories guiding this study were reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Reflective practice views reflection as the consideration of underlying theoretical, ethical, and sociocultural assumptions manifested in experience (Dewey, 1933; van Manen, 2015), and transformative learning views this process of reflection, especially on unusual experiences, as the mechanism of transformation of worldview perspectives (Mezirow, 1990, 1991). Therefore, the theories of reflective practice and transformative learning helped describe instructors’ experiences of teaching theological reflection, such as conveying the purpose of reflection to students; encountering challenges in helping students choose appropriate experiences on which to reflect; witnessing benefits of reflection, such as changed perspectives
on previously problematic situations; and utilizing instructional methods for fostering authentic reflections for transformation.

**Significance of the Study**

My research is of practical benefit to instructors as they struggle with the challenges associated with teaching reflection outlined in the literature, such as the lack of a clear definition or singular outcome for reflection, combined with students’ reticence to engage in critical reflection due to fear of judgment, as well as individual characteristics and cultural sensitivities that influence reflection. Likewise, my research is of empirical significance, given the paucity of research on reflection in fields other than healthcare and education. Finally, my research is of theoretical importance, as it approaches the topic of reflection from a unique theoretical perspective that blends reflective practice and transformative learning.

**Practical**

Research on the teaching of reflective practice may be beneficial to instructors and field supervisors, as reflection is viewed as an important ability by numerous professional organizations, though it is notoriously difficult to teach. Those within the caring professions – such as religious leaders (ATS, 2015c), educators (NACTE, 2008), nurses (ANA, 2015), and social workers (NASW, 2013) – are expected to develop the ability to reflect on professional encounters during training and sustain the practice throughout their careers. However, instructing students in the art of reflection is challenging, given the lack of clarity concerning the concept of reflection (Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Caty, Kinsella, & Doyle, 2015; Eaton, 2016; Rose, 2016); the multiple purposes for which reflection is employed, such as critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014); emotional intelligence (Pack, 2014); self-efficacy (Stahl et al., 2016; Tan, 2013); students’ tendency to fear judgment by peers (Dalgarno, Reupert, & Bishop, 2015; Testa &
Egan, 2015) or instructors (Binks et al., 2013; Marsh, 2014); cultural differences concerning the expression of divergent opinions during reflection (Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016; Wanda et al., 2016; Zhan & Wan, 2016); and individual experiences or preferences that influence reflection (Farr & Riordan, 2015; Griffith, 2017; Wong, 2009). Therefore, presenting instructors’ views on reflective practice, my study’s goal, may help others overcome the challenges of cultivating future helping professionals who meaningfully reflect on their practice. The experiences of those who teach theological reflection in the online environment may be particularly useful to those affiliated with ATS-accredited institutions, as approximately one-third of students at ATS schools, as at other U.S. postsecondary institutions, complete one or more courses online (Seaman, Allen & Seaman, 2018; Tanner, 2017). Furthermore, approximately one-fifth of ATS institutions (ATS, 2018; Tanner, 2017) have received exceptions to the residency requirement, so that students attending these institutions can obtain, completely by distance, professional degrees, such as the MDiv or professional MA in a specialized ministry (e.g., in religious education or counseling), both of which involve field education that often is coupled with theological reflection, as noted in Waggoner and Wilson (2020), as well as ATS degree program standards A.2.5.3 and B.2.5.1 (ATS, 2015b). Moreover, many view online instruction as a method to reach students in the Global South, where Christianity has been growing rapidly (Beaty, 2014), as well as a modern extension of Paul’s epistolary ministry (Forrest & Lamport, 2013; Jackson, 2017) or an emulation of the divine pedagogy in which the creator accommodates instruction to humankind’s abilities and limitations (Gresham, 2006). Furthermore, helping students become reflective professionals is known to be challenging in residential programs and within the online environment, having been described as “speaking into a void” (Rivers et al., 2014, p. 222) and a “cold way of teaching” (Downing &
Dyment, 2013). Nonetheless, relationships in which mentors serve as a “reflective friend” (Wong, 2011, p. 525) have been proposed as a means of formation for seminary students who earn their degrees online (Brown, 2016; Cartwright, 2014, 2017; Fryar, Wilcox, Hilton, & Rich, 2018; Graham, 2018; Hockridge, 2015, 2018a, 2018b). Additionally, some healthcare professionals aim to create learning experiences that present spirituality as an aspect of reflective practice for holistic care (Devenny & Duffy, 2014), while others aim to reorient clinical pastoral education (CPE) curricula around a set of measurable skills, rather than theological reflection (Fitchett, Tartaglia, Massey, Jackson-Jordon, & Derrickson, 2015). Consequently, the voice of theological-reflection instructors in the online environment may assist stakeholders, such as educational administrators and professional associations (e.g., the ATS), in constructing the future of online theological education; instructors and students learning about theological reflection; practitioners engaged in theological reflection; and theorists seeking empirical evidence to justify their conceptualizations of theologically grounded reflective practice.

**Empirical**

Although reflection is viewed as essential for those within the helping professions, teaching students to become reflective practitioners is complex due to the influence of personal characteristics (Farr & Riordan, 2015; Griffith, 2017; Wong, 2009) and culture on reflection (Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016; Wanda et al., 2016; Zhan & Wan, 2016); the lack of a clear definition of reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Gerhardt, 2013; Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, & Charlin, 2014; Rose, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013; Wilson, 2013); multiple outcomes associated with reflection, such as critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Pack, 2014), self-efficacy (Stahl et al., 2016; Tan, 2013), and professional identity (Gelfuso, 2016; Hatcher, 2013; Jack, 2015; Walker, 2015;
Wong, 2016a); and inauthentic reflections prompted by fears of judgment by instructors (Binks et al., 2013) or peers (Testa & Egan, 2015). Clearly, teaching helping professionals to become reflective practitioners is both challenging and complex.

Additionally, the online environment presents numerous challenges for instructors that point to the need for further research on this delivery mode (Beach, 2011a; Estep & Yates, 2012; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014; Rivers, Richardson, & Price, 2014; Westbrook, 2014). For example, Ross (2014a, 2014b) noted that reflections completed online often include an unobservable audience, such as a grading instructor with whom the student may or may not be familiar. Because these students cannot witness their instructors’ reactions, such as empathy or anger, when expressing frustration with the assignment, they may simply write reflections that conform to perceived norms or those stated in the assessment criteria. Fundamentally, this online interaction between instructor and student can reduce reflections to mechanical performances isolated from professional practice and forgotten after they have been graded, a concern voiced not only by Ross (2014a, 2014b), but also by Macfarlane (2015, 2016). Moreover, students who fear that their online reflections may be viewed by future employers sometimes craft reflections that present their achievements, rather than their development, and they also have expressed concerns that the online platform, hosted by a governmental agency, could be accessed by unauthorized users (Brown et al., 2013). The idea of detailing online, e.g., a potentially embarrassing event in which they failed to deliver necessary care to a patient in their practicum settings, frightens some of these students and has prompted them to draft reflections on experiences that did not necessarily foster growth, but instead protected them from future liabilities as medical professionals. Although researchers have acknowledged challenges for instructors in the online environment, Enochsson (2018) found levels of reflection written for the
online environment to be of comparable quality to those spoken in offline discussion groups. The mediated communication of online education consequently introduces an added wrinkle to instruction in reflective practice that has not been addressed sufficiently yet in the literature and that this research has sought to elucidate.

Despite the challenge of instructing others in the art of reflection and the value of research concerning theological education (Wheeler, 2017), scant research has been published on the process of helping future religious leaders engage in theological reflection. For instance, adequate research has been produced to warrant the publication of literature reviews on reflective practice for teachers (Beauchamp, 2015; Farrell, 2016; Standal & Moe, 2013), healthcare professionals (Caty et al., 2015; Dubé & Ducharme, 2015; Goulet, Larue, & Alderson, 2015), and social workers (Norrie, Hammond, D’Avray, Collington, & Fook, 2012). Comparable literature reviews are not yet available for those within theological schools because scant research has been published on the teaching of theological reflection. Furthermore, the few studies that have been published on the instruction of theological reflection have focused predominantly on the perspectives of online students (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014), residential instructors (Mallaby & Tan, 2018; Wong, 2009) and students (Wong, 2016a), or practitioners (Kelly, 2013; Landau et al., 2013; Nuzum, Meaney, O’Donoghue, & Morris, 2015; Paterson & Kelly, 2013), rather than online instructors’ views. Moreover, other texts that have mentioned theological reflection through distance education have focused on broader issues, such as character formation of online (Jung, 2015a, 2015b) students in theological education, as well as general guidelines for online instructors concerning the four overarching goals of MDiv programs accredited by the ATS: knowledge of institutional mission and religious heritage; familiarity with cultural contextualization; increasing personal and moral
formation; and the capacity for religious leadership required for MDiv programs accredited by the ATS (Cartwright, 2014, 2017). Likewise, peer groups of instructors, who have discussed formation and education in the online environment as part of the ATS process of redeveloping the organization’s standards and procedures (Tanner, 2018), conversed about broad issues, such as the merging of outcomes for residential and online students so that learning objectives, rather than delivery modes, could become instructors and institutions’ focus through practices such as “signature assignments” (Graham, 2018, p. 20) compared across residential and distance programs’ educational models. Reflection was mentioned only tangentially by the professors dialoguing about spiritual or personal formation, who viewed it as a means of shaping students within their home contexts through reflection groups and reports supplied by or on such groups (Graham, 2018). Despite the growing availability of fully online professional degrees, such as the MDiv or MA in specialized ministry (ATS, 2018c; Tanner, 2017), and the importance of faculty “in the development of academic policy [as well as the] oversight of academic and curricular programs and decisions” (ATS, 2015c, p. 23), the voice of professors seeking to help future religious leaders in cultivating reflective ministries has not been expressed adequately yet in the literature. Therefore, my research potentially aids stakeholders – such as scholars investigating reflective practice, administrators developing institutional or professional guidelines, helping professionals committed to continual development through reflection, and instructors or students of reflective practice – by presenting the views of seminary professors who use the online environment as part of distance-education courses to engage in theological reflection – views that currently are underrepresented in the empirical literature.
The current literature on reflective practice has criticized the lack of conceptual clarity and inappropriate division between thought and action (Collin et al., 2013; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Hébert, 2015; Leigh, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013) that seems to neglect the model of a reflective practitioner, as described by Schön (1983), which also has been critiqued for neglecting the inclusion of ethical and theoretical knowledge on reflection (Kreber, 2015). Therefore, Hébert (2015) recommended focusing on the theory of reflective practice as articulated by van Manen (2015), who emphasized the importance of reflection as a way of being in his concept of pedagogical tact. Therefore, in my research, I integrated the theories of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1991) because transformation requires change in worldview perspective that cannot be severed easily from future actions and thoughts. Other researchers similarly have integrated transformative learning theory and reflective practice to elucidate how reflective practice changes individuals (Black, 2015; Peabody & Noyes, 2017) and groups of individuals (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery, & Van Stratum, 2015; Parra, Gutiérrez, & Aldana, 2015), and my integrated theoretical framework (Figure 1) may help reunite the fragmented conceptualizations of reflection for, on, and in action reported in the literature. By presenting a uniquely integrated theoretical framework, I hoped to enable stakeholders – such as theorists of reflective practice, professional associations drafting certification standards, practitioners interested in reflective practice, and instructors and students of reflective practice – to describe, more accurately, a viable conceptual framework for reflective practice.
**Figure 1. Theoretical Framework for My Research**

Figure 1. Integrated view of reflective practice that includes transformative learning theory.

**Research Questions**

This study was designed to investigate the lived experiences of online instructors of theological reflection through a transcendental phenomenological investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Specifically, this study was framed around the following questions:

**Central Question (CQ):** How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

Current scholarship on the teaching and learning of theological reflection has been limited to the views of online students (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014) or residential instructors (Mallaby & Tan, 2018; Wong, 2009) and students (Wong, 2016a), rather than online instructors’ views. Although online theological education has mushroomed in the past decade (Tanner, 2015, 2017), representing a method of reaching a wider
group of students (Beaty, 2014; Brown, 2016; Lowe & Lowe, 2010; Graham, 2018; Scharen & Miller, 2017), and reflection in conjunction with mentoring relationships has been proposed as a method of formation for future religious leaders who pursue their degrees wholly online (Brown, 2016; Graham, 2018; Hockridge, 2013, 2015), no research has been conducted yet on the experiences of online instructors who have facilitated such reflective dialogues. By investigating the perspectives of faculty at ATS-accredited Christian schools, this research sought to enrich the existing literature by giving voice to the experiences of those serving as online faculty concerning theological reflection at Christian ATS institutions.

**Sub-Question One (SQ1):** What do participants describe as the content and context of their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

Phenomenological research seeks not only to portray the people, objects, spaces, and times (van Manen & Adams, 2010) associated with an experience, but also the circumstances and situations that have helped create this experience, i.e., transcendental phenomenology attempts to convey the texture (i.e., the what) and the structure (i.e., the how) of a given event (Moustakas, 1994). An experience’s structure includes not only the material and immaterial conditions impinging directly on the experience, but also the historical and social influences shaping the participants’ experiences (Creswell, 2013; Davis, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). By asking participants to describe both the content of their teaching (e.g., the specific instructional methods and materials employed in their courses), as well as the context of their teaching (e.g., prior educational experiences in seminary or subsequent professional development through independent reading and discourse with colleagues), I intended to create a holistic representation of their experience that conveys the substance and structure of teaching theological reflection in the online environment.
Clarifying the conditions of and influences on instructors of theological reflection may help others teach and research reflective practice, given the diversity of methods for and definitions of reflection currently discussed in the literature. The manifold methods for reflection that have been recommended include stepwise procedures (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Gibbs, 1988; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995), consideration of the emotions and imagination (Dykstra, 2008; Eisner, 2001, 2017; Kinast, 1983), group dialogue (Acquah & Commins, 2015; Groome, 1980), video (Corbin-Frazier & Eick, 2015; Mulder & Dull, 2014; Powell, 2016), portfolios (Domac, Anderson, O’Reilly, & Smith, 2015), role play (Hanya, Yonei, Kurono, & Kamei, 2014), creative writing (Tyson, 2016), and fine art (Kidd et al., 2016; McBain, Donnelly, Hilder, O’Leary, & McKinlay, 2015; Schwind et al., 2015). Definitions for theological reflection (Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Chandler, 2016; Hey & Roux, 2012; Le Cornu, 2015; O’Connor & Meakes, 2008; Porter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2008; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995), as well as reflection, are equally diverse (Dewey, 1933; Goulet et al., 2015; Ixer, 2016; Kolb, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2014; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015), and as some argue, the very concept of reflection has not been well-established yet (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Rose, 2016). To complicate matters further, some have contested the notion of experience as a tactile experience and have maintained that lectures, reading, writing, or discussions, in certain contexts, may comprise experiences worthy of reflection, especially since Dewey (1925) ceased attempting to define experience (Blenkinsop, Nolan, Hunt, Stonehouse, & Telford, 2016). Given the plethora of definitions for and methods of reflection, elucidating the specific constituents of and influences on instructors of theological reflection when teaching their students to engage reflectively with the act of ministry may prove beneficial in advancing scholarship on the
teaching and learning of reflective practice, as these constituents and influences may help delineate how theological educators understand the concept of theological reflection.

Sub-Question Two (SQ2): How do participants describe the benefits encountered in their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

Scholars currently disagree concerning the value of reflection for future professionals. Fitchett et al. (2015) argued that chaplain-training programs should focus on competencies rather than reflections; theorists on reflection, such as Boud (1999), as well as professors of nursing (Beveridge, Fruchter, Sanmartin, & deLottinville, 2014), have recommended that reflective assignments not be used for evaluation (Beveridge et al., 2014); and McGarr and McCormack (2014) cited the lack of critical reflection on field placement cultures as a serious threat to the development of student teachers, given their propensity to conform with, rather than challenge, oppressive power structures within placement settings. However, other scholars have emphasized the value of theological reflection in developing professional identity (Hatcher, 2013; Cronshaw & Menzies, 2015), forming individuals for the relational professions (Hockridge, 2013), fostering the ability to pursue lifelong learning (Nash, 2014; O’Brien, 2016; Graham et al., 2005; Ward, 2011), and integrating theory with practice (Foley, 2014, 2017). Scholars from other helping professions – such as education, healthcare, and social work – similarly have praised reflection for its role in cultivating critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Marlowe et al., 2015; Pack, 2014), and self-efficacy (Stahl et al., 2016; Tan, 2013). Therefore, this research may contribute to the debate on reflection’s significance by describing how online instructors of theological reflection perceive reflective practice as beneficial.

Sub-Question Three (SQ3): How do participants describe the challenges encountered in their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?
Instructors repeatedly have mentioned the challenges that they encounter when teaching students to become reflective, including a lack of trusting relationships with peers (Flanagan, 2015) or instructors (Floding, Fuller, Huffaker, Parker, Rodriguez, & Louis, 2015; Roberts, 2016; Ross, 2014a, 2014b; Testa & Egan, 2015), and internship environments or workplace cultures that discourage reflection (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015; McGarr & McCormack, 2014). Moreover, the concept of reflection remains ambiguous (Collin et al., 2013), individual experiences or preferences can affect reflection (Farr & Riordan, 2015; Griffith, 2017; Wong, 2009), cultural differences can inhibit open reflection (Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016), and the online environment may be perceived as thwarting meaningful dialogue (Rivers et al., 2014). Therefore, further research was warranted on the unique challenges facing those who teach theological reflection in the online environment.

**Definitions**

The terms below were relevant to my discussion of reflective practice’s background, my review of relevant literature, the presentation of my theoretical framework, and the explanation of my research.

1. *Association of Theological Schools institutions* – ATS-accredited institutions are graduate schools of theological education that prepare future religious leaders – such as ministers, pastoral counselors, directors of religious education programs, worship leaders, and professors – who serve at ATS institutions. These institutions are approved by the accrediting commission of the ATS and conform to general institutional, educational, and degree-program standards approved by this organization (ATS, 2014a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d).
2. **Online environment** – The online environment refers to one type of distance education described in ATS (2015d) Standard ES.4.1, in which “the majority of instructor-directed learning” (ATS, 2015d, p. 12) occurs in situations “without students and instructors being in the same location” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) through “synchronous or asynchronous … online[-] … assisted instruction” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) and that includes “regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10). The ATS plans to release new standards in 2020 (Tanner, 2018) and may introduce changes to this definition, such as allowing synchronous online education to contribute to residency requirements, as recommended by the ATS peer group for schools educating the permanent diaconate (Graham, 2018), or removing the distinction between residential and distance education altogether through “modality neutral” (Graham, 2018, p. 29) learning outcomes applied across delivery formats, as suggested by the groups discussing online education and formation. When conducting my research, I used the definition for the online environment as stated here because it is approved by the IRB. Because my research was concluded prior to the approval of the new standards in June 2020 (Yamada, 2018), I did not need to consult with my committee to seek a change in protocol from the IRB or a similar way to overcome difficulties encountered due to the new standards, such as clarifying the nature of my study to academic deans, participants, or others in any way involved in my research. However, the current definition for the online environment explicitly excludes hybrid courses overviewed in ATS (2015d) Standard E.S.4.2.19 that count toward residency requirements, and in which “the majority of instructor-directed learning occurs in situations where both faculty and students are in person on the
school’s main campus or at an extension approved for the school to offer the full degree” (ATS, 2015d, p. 12). Furthermore, the existing ATS definition for distance education, of which online education is one delivery mode, closely resembles the definition for distance education employed by Seaman et al. (2018), who, for the past 15 years (Allen & Seaman, 2003), have published reports on U.S. higher education based on statistics gathered by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which are published biennially (NCES, 2018), and who recently have shifted from issuing reports revolving around definitions based on the amount of online instruction (Allen, Poulin, & Straut, 2016) to definitions based solely on distance between instructors and students (Allen & Seaman, 2017).

3. **Regular and substantive interaction** – Although the precise definition of regular and substantive interaction remains at the discretion of the Department of Education (Bergeron, 2016), some instructors in the ATS provisionally have defined “regular and substantive interaction between faculty and students” (Graham, 2018, p. 154) as “frequent dialogue initiated and pursued by credentialed faculty and responded to by students in a timely manner … [that] address[es] substantive content related to the competency/competencies that the students are learning” (Graham, 2018, p. 154). Furthermore, the ATS has stipulated that “online courses delivered asynchronously are typically expected to require students and faculty to engage at least weekly … [for example] through online discussion forums” (ATS Commission on Accrediting, 2017, p. 17). Regular and substantive interaction is required for all ATS courses because “no Commission-approved courses can be offered by correspondence education” (ATS, 2015d, p. 43). Furthermore, Section 103(7) of the Higher Education
Act of 1965 mandates that no more than half of courses offered at an institution can be offered through correspondence as a requirement for federal student aid – or the synonymous term, Title IV – eligibility (Bergeron, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). These limitations on correspondence courses seem advisable, given the abuses to which they became susceptible after their initial success in educating non-traditional students through penny postcards (Berg, 2005) and extension-site courses provided through the University of Chicago (Berens, 2015).

4. **Reflection** – Although the concept of reflection has not been defined adequately yet (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Rose, 2016; Wilson, 2013), I define reflection as the careful consideration of past, present, and future experiences to examine the underlying theoretical, ethical, and sociocultural assumptions expressed within these experiences for the purpose of altering, when necessary, these assumptions, as well as the individual or organizational frameworks and procedures that uphold such principles (Dewey, 1933; Goulet et al., 2015; Ixer, 2016; Johns, 2010; Kolb, 2014; Nguyen et al., 2014; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015).

5. **Theological reflection** – Theological reflection, likewise, considers experience, as well as the beliefs manifested within experience (Thompson et al., 2008), for the purpose of modifying, when appropriate, subsequent actions or underlying beliefs (i.e., operative theology). However, unlike reflection, theological reflection specifically draws on the relevant faith community’s verbal and nonverbal traditions, as well as sources found in sensory experiences (Peckruhn, 2017) and the surrounding culture, such as science or politics (Graham et al., 2005), and can include private consideration of personal behavior, as in Augustine’s spiritual autobiography.
(Graham et al., 2005, 2007); sharing stories of experiences framed by theological concepts or Biblical themes (Graham et al., 2005, 2007; Lamport & Yoder, 2006); conversations with other members of the faith community (Groome, 1998; Johnson, 2004; Mellott, 2016); enacting professed beliefs that are examined continually through reflection to merge reflection with action (Graham, 2002; Graham et al., 2005, 2007); writing poetry or autobiographies (Walton, 2014); expressing theological concepts in symbols and words best understood by the local community, but not necessarily found in traditional theological texts (Graham et al., 2005, 2007); and spiritual practices, such as prayer (Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Chandler, 2016; Hey & Roux, 2012; Johnson, 2004; Kofoed, 2011; Le Cornu, 2015; O’Connor & Meakes, 2008; Porter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2008; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995).

6. **Christian institution of higher education** – A Christian institution of higher education is a college, university, or seminary either affiliated with a denomination categorized by Atwood (2010) as Christian or identified as Christian in a publicly accessible institutional document, such as an academic catalog.

**Summary**

This research addressed the existing literature gap regarding the experience of instructors of online theological reflection who were instructing future religious leaders. Currently, extensive research exists on instructing future helping professionals on reflective practice in the fields of education (Beauchamp, 2015), healthcare (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015), and social work (Burr et al., 2016; Theobald, Gardner, & Long, 2017; Testa & Egan, 2015). However, a problem existed in the current literature because the voice of online instructors preparing Christian professionals to engage in theological reflection had not been examined yet. Research on
teaching theological reflection had been limited to the perspectives of online students (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014) and residential instructors (Mallaby & Tan, 2018; Wong, 2009) and students (Wong, 2016a). Therefore, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This literature review surveys empirical literature published in English over a period of six years (2013-2018) concerning formal instruction on reflective practice for higher education students within the helping professions (e.g., educators; healthcare professionals, such as nurses; religious leaders; and social workers). The review begins by discussing the theoretical frameworks commonly employed in studies on reflective practice, then recommends a framework that may help advance the theoretical understanding of reflection. Next, it provides an overview of the primary findings from research studies on reflection – including instruction methods, such as structured protocols for reflection, media-rich assignments, the arts, and group discussions – as well as outcomes surveyed in extant research, including self-efficacy, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, and the fostering of professional identities. This literature survey continues by outlining the numerous challenges associated with teaching reflection, including individual and cultural differences that impact reflection, as well as beneficial and harmful audience influences on students’ reflective assignments. This overview of the empirical literature concludes by highlighting how the Internet has facilitated reflection, as well as noting the need for future research to investigate the purpose and definition of reflective practice, the use of the online learning environment for training in reflective practice, and instructional practices for future professionals outside of education and healthcare (e.g., social workers and religious leaders).

Theoretical Framework

Numerous theorists have been used to analyze instructional techniques in reflective practice, including Aristotle (2009), Dewey (1933), Schön (1983), Kolb (2014), Mezirow (1990,
1991), and van Manen (2015). I maintain that these perspectives can be integrated into a holistic framework for reflective practice that comprises experience, reflection, and transformation, as illustrated in Figure 1. Reflection, within this novel framework, occurs before, during, or after professional experiences and helps transform practice continually. Therefore, future researchers may want to utilize this integrated framework to advance the theoretical understanding of reflective practice.

**Aristotle**

Scholars have traced reflection to ancient philosophers such as Socrates (Reynolds & Vince, 2004; West & West, 1998), who noted that the unexamined life is not worth living, and Aristotle (Cheung, 2015; Smagorinsky et al., 2015; Tannebaum, Hall, & Deaton, 2013; Rykkje, 2017; Tyson, 2016), who emphasized the role of deliberation (i.e., reflection) in practice in meaningfully integrating knowledge, character, and action (i.e., phronesis). For Aristotle, deliberation is the process by which practitioners draw on their knowledge, experience, and professional values so that they deploy their skills “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right aim, and in the right way” (Dunne, 1993, p. 368). Deliberation is required to determine the appropriate response to a given situation because many actions performed by those in the helping professions “are brought about by our own efforts, but not always in the same way … e.g., questions of medical treatment” (Dunne, 1993, pp. 259–260). Deliberation, likewise, is required to learn from these experiences so that a given situation can “unconceal” its own particular significance” (Dunne, 1993, pp. 305–306), thereby allowing for the “consolidating … extending … or modifying” (Dunne, 1993, p. 305) of prior experiences. Reflection is connected intimately, if not synonymously, with deliberation. Marlow et al. (2015) defined *phronesis* as the process by which “technical skill, lived experience, and reflexivity
come together so that [the professional] may apply the right action or choice for a given situation” (Marlow et al., 2015, p. 20), and Carr (2018) coupled the term reflection with deliberation when discussing the expression of knowledge, skills, and character in action. Moreover, Florence (2014) linked Aristotelian philosophy and reflection to critical thinking, which he defined as “the ability of one to reasonably and reflectively interpret, analyze, infer, and evaluate a situation” (p. 353). Additionally, critical thinking skills have been linked to reflection by other scholars, such as Naber and Wyatt (2014), and deliberation is literally “analysis (analusis)” (Dunne, 1993, p. 350) in the original Greek of Aristotle’s (2009) Nicomachean Ethics. Consequently, deliberation and reflection play a central role in the enactment of knowledge and skills through phronesis.

For Aristotle, deliberation not only was linked to the skills and knowledge necessary to respond appropriately to encountered events, but also was intertwined with the character of the professional performing these actions. Dunne (1993) noted that “phronesis [is] ... non-instrumental … [and] puts a premium on … experience and perceptiveness ... is bound up with the kind of person one is [and therefore] falls on the side of virtue, rather than of knowledge” (p. 273). For example, playing a flute for “the S.S. in Auschwitz” (Dunne, 1993, p. 265) with brilliant technical skill is inferior to creating a table for a poor person, albeit with less precision, given the moral implications of those receiving the benefits of the enacted technical skills and knowledge. When discussing virtue, Aristotle repeatedly referenced action, and phronesis, likewise, was portrayed as tending toward deeds done in a praiseworthy manner. For example, a just person not only understands justice, but also understands “how actions must be done … in order to be just” (Aristotle, 1975, p. 317), and phronesis, likewise, is “intrinsically toward action” (Dunne, 1993, p. 264), rather than mere knowing. Therefore, Aristotle viewed actions,
knowledge, and character as parts of an inseparable whole, as is the expression of these qualities in professional contexts evaluated through reflection and deliberation (i.e., phronesis). Thus, Dunne (1993) repeatedly warned those preparing and overseeing educators to shun the common tendency to make the teaching profession “practitioner proof” (Dunne, 2005, p. 375) by creating standardized manuals for education that disregard the practitioner’s values, skills, and knowledge.

Not only does the character of practitioners influence their expression of phronesis, but the contexts in which they operate also influence the final outcomes of their practice. Aristotle viewed humans as contextualized beings who could not control their actions’ outcomes completely because their “lack of sovereignty always puts … [them] at some kind of hazard and in which there is always a need for situated reflection for which no indemnity can be provided by a method or technique” (Dunne, 1993, p. 177). For example, those navigating the seas ultimately are subject to the wind and waves’ unpredictable motions and cannot create a set of procedures that will grant them complete “mastery or domination” (Dunne, 1993, p. 256) during their voyages. Instead, they must be willing to cope with the circumstances in which they find themselves to the best of their abilities, and “situated reflection” (Dunne, 1993, p. 177) supplies them with one way in which to respond to their uncontrollable environments, despite attempts by those advocating techne to “provide a bulwark against contingencies … including thinking itself” (Dunne, 1993, p. 153). Humans’ vulnerability in the face of unforeseeable events, regardless of their actions or attitudes, creates a necessary limit to techne’s ability to achieve its “pre-planned ‘ends’ through the efficacy of methodical ‘means’ … [and similarly] shows the limits of instrumentality or method-based rationality” (Dunne, 1993, pp. 133–134). Therefore, techne that
is ripped from professional contexts in which it is employed cannot create a way to bypass the contingencies to which humans continually are subjected.

Dunne (1993) traced his concerns about techne as a panacea for unpredictable circumstances and as an alternative to more modern thinkers than Aristotle – including Newman (1992), Collingwood (1938), Arendt (2013), Gadamer (1989), and Habermas (1974, 1981) – for deliberative professionals. Newman (1992) described the role of moral virtues, as well as tacit beliefs, in evaluating belief systems that he argued could not be reduced to a set of logical rules, or a “technical apparatus of words and propositions” (Newman, 1992, p. 274). When deciding whether an argument is valid, humans rely on unspoken beliefs acquired due to “the sentiments of the age, country, religion, social habits and ideas of the particular inquirers” (Dunne, 1993, p. 39) and are influenced, likewise, by their “moral as well as … intellectual being” (Dunne, 1993, p. 35). However, personal decisions about religion are not Newman’s (1992) primary concern, as they are made in a manner that reflects the fundamental predispositions of those making the decisions, but academic verdicts on topics such as scientific paradigms’ validity are arbitrated in an uncodified fashion that resembles the interweaving of silk threads, rather than the casting of an iron rod. Kuhn (1970) explained that scientists analyze evidence for and against scientific theories in a nonlinear way so that “no neutral algorithm for theory-choice, no systematic decision procedure which, properly applied, must lead each individual in the group to the same decision” (p. 200). Consequently, decisions made by humans inevitably will be imbued with their attitudes and characters so that technical guides for rational or acceptable decision making never can insulate, infallibly and completely, their choices from the unique influences of individual people. Such a scenario, in which decisions are made by an algorithm applied systematically in all cases, would remove human thought’s “elasticity” (Newman, 1992, p. 263),
thereby straitjacketing professional deliberation so that it would become “oppressed and hampered as David in Saul’s armor” (Newman, 1992, p. 263).

Evaluating ideas, as discussed by Newman (1992) and Kuhn (1970), resembles the descriptions of expression through artistic media by Collingwood (1938) and action within political or social groups by Arendt (2013) because such forms of self-disclosure are bound up intimately with a person’s identity and cannot be distilled to stepwise procedures applicable to all humans in all situations. For Collingwood (1938), artists create their works because of their ability to “see well” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 304) and, therefore, are “person[s] who … can paint well” (Collingwood, 1938, p. 304), i.e., they create their art only because of the people they are and how they perceive their surroundings. Additionally, composers draft symphonies and writers draft novels to express their ideas and emotions to become more aware and “conscious” (Dunne, 1993, p. 81) of their thoughts and feelings. Artists do not follow codebooks that describe the specific brushstrokes, musical notes, or hand gestures useful in eliciting predetermined emotions or cognitions in their audiences, but instead seek to express themselves so that audiences can enter conversations with their works and engage with them in ways that they deem suitable. Dunne (1993) noted Collingwood’s (1938) dislike of art forms that he regarded as passive, such as “films, radio, gramophone, … and even the printing press” (Dunne, 1993, p. 79), in which audiences did not participate actively in their creation and traced this to Collingwood’s (1938) belief that art should express for the sake of engagement, rather than for achieving prespecified responses triggered by stimuli elicited through artistic techniques. Therefore, Shakespeare’s plays, Kandinsky’s brushstrokes, and Bach’s fugues cannot and should not be treated as ends
created by techniques to achieve a given outcome, but should be viewed as expressions of ideas and emotions with which others can engage and form their own works of art.

Arendt (2013) similarly viewed action as a form of expression in which humans reveal themselves and which should not be controlled by instrumental means designed, for instance, to maximize the utility of all citizens and simultaneously avert the unpredictable situations necessarily created in complex systems, such as social groups. Modern governments, in Arendt’s (2013) view, sought “mastership” (p. 234) over their citizens so that they could manage them for instrumental means efficiently, such as the production of “tangible products and demonstrable profits” (Arendt, 2013, p. 220). Arendt (2013) saw this transformation of human actions into mere fabrication, or the “making” (Arendt, 2013, p. 229) of material goods, as inappropriate, given that “action … involves an enactment and disclosure of an agent’s uniqueness” (Dunne, 1993, p. 12) and that “it is through action that a person discloses ‘who’ rather than ‘what’ she is” (Dunne, 1993, p. 90). Arendt (2013) felt that individuals instead should be given the freedom necessary to “live well” (Arendt, 2013, p. 193) and that the reduction of human actions as means to governmentally chosen ends as a reaction to the “unpredictability” (Arendt, 2013, p. 220), “frailty” (Arendt, 2013, p. 220), and “hazardousness of human existence” (Dunne, 1993, p. 98). According to Arendt (2013), modern governments, by crafting technical means of regulating activities in which humans participate, seek to remove the “vicissitudes of fortune … [created] by one’s dependence on others … and the unruly depths within oneself” (Dunne, 1993, pp. 152–153), so that humans can produce the ends that governments deem most useful for society. She viewed this attempt as ultimately futile, given that we are always and inevitably “caught up in relationships and attachments that always put … [us and our plans] at risk” (Dunne, 1993, p. 102). Arendt (2013), in response to this attempt to erase all uncertainty from human relations and
actions, proposed that humans be given the freedom to acknowledge their dependence on others and the uncontrollability of their futures by encouraging them to create a sense of order in their lives by making promises to one another – and whenever these promises are broken, giving them opportunities to forgive others for the value that they place on the humanity of the people whom they are forgiving. Thus, these promises can construct “islands of predictability … [in the] ocean of uncertainty” (Arendt, 2013, p. ix), in which humans are placed simply by being part of a social group. At the same time, forgiveness allows for the avoidance of revenge cycles created when such promises or covenants are broken “for the sake of the person [who transgressed the covenant] (Arendt, 2013, p. 243) and in knowledge knowing that we are subject to the same fickleness and unreliability” (Dunne, 1993, p. 98) displayed by the person who broke the covenant. Promises and forgiveness, unlike mandated social and political policies, respect humans’ freedom to express themselves through their actions within society and also acknowledge all human pursuits’ proneness to being riddled with unforeseen and uncontrollable circumstances and relationships.

Just as works of art for Collingwood (1938) and embodied actions for Arendt (2013) communicate humans’ unique identities and contexts, so do the interpretations of texts for Gadamer (1989) represent the characteristics and socio-historical settings of those producing the interpretations. Gadamer (1989) viewed interpretations as conversations between authors and their audiences who necessarily were approaching the text from worldviews imbued with personal beliefs and who were situated within socio-historical settings that influenced their interpretations. Consequently, interpretations cannot be distilled from texts by an infallible procedure that always distills the meaning for all individuals regardless of their contexts. Instead, interpretations need to be understood “at every moment, in every particular situation in a new
and different way” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 275). Technical methods designed to recreate the original authors’ ideas, in Gadamer’s (1989) view, were flawed because they disregarded the traditions and contexts that audiences necessarily bring to texts and with which they enrich the original texts with meanings for their own times and locations as they craft their understandings through engaged hermeneutics.

While Gadamer’s (1989) interests centered around the interpretation of texts, Habermas’ (1974, 1981) interests revolved around communication and the development of social and political norms that respected not only scientific theories, but also theories derived from philosophy, ethics, aesthetics, and similar fields. Habermas (1974) was concerned that modern societies were being “cybernetically regulated” (Dunne, 1993, p. 187) by procedures that embraced positivism to the exclusion of other ideologies and beliefs in addition to those who were expected to abide by these regulations. Humans individually possess “moral intuitions [that they acquired] by growing up in a family” (Habermas, 1971, p. 113) and collectively by preserving the memory of prior generations’ “past suffering and sacrifices” (Habermas, 1992, pp. 139–140). Habermas (1992) viewed these personal beliefs as extraordinarily valuable and admitted that he “would rather abandon scholarship than allow this core [of personal values and predispositions] to soften” (Habermas, 1992, p. 26). These externally derived policies are enforced through “compensatory measures” (Dunne, 1993, p. 190), such as money and power, that ignore the concerns and interests of those whose lives they control. In place of socio-political norms developed by a small number of experts trained in the empirical sciences, Habermas (1981) proposed communicative action or public discourse as an “intersubjective medium through which persons regulate their actions toward each other ... and form their own personal identities” (Dunne, 1993, p. 194). Such communication would allow individuals to
develop standards reciprocally for guiding their social organizations, while simultaneously respecting their own and one another’s most deeply held values. Thus, communicative action would avert the plague of societies guided by methods “in which technology become[s] autonomous [and] dictates a value system ... to the domains of praxis it [i.e., technology] has usurped and all in the name of value freedom” (Habermas, 1974, p. 230), despite empirical scientists’ inability to claim that they are value-neutral, given that scientists are influenced by their theories and cannot claim “a privileged standpoint outside their data” (Dunne, 1993, p. 184). Thus, Habermas (1974, 1981) discerned the same tendencies toward technique and disregard for individuals in the field of political science that Gadamer (1989), Arendt (2013), Collingwood (1938), and Newman (1992) perceived in the disciplines of hermeneutics, social science, aesthetics, and logic.

Although Habermas (1974, 1981) presented an ethical and humane way in which to derive principles for conducting human affairs, Dunne (1993) reinforced the role of praxis in acting as a counterweight to such principles, lest they become a technique to which all practitioners must conform unfailingly by turning to the example of psychoanalysis described by Habermas (1971). Psychoanalysis represented an example of practice in which principles for living (roughly analogous to theory) could be provided, but needed to be accepted and applied willingly by the patient (analogous to a practitioner who accepts and integrates theory in daily interactions). As Dunne (1993) explained, “psychoanalytic knowledge is generated ... by the analyst, but he cannot simply [‘]apply’ it to the analysand ... to ‘make’ him well-adjusted ... [This] knowledge ... is interactive ... transforming it [experience] into a reflective process of self-constitution” (Dunne, 1993, pp. 180–181). The analyst- analysand relationship characterizes human interaction that required acceptance and modification of the discursively derived
conclusions by the practitioner (i.e., the patient). The patient – after considering the relevance of the knowledge gleaned through dialogue to existing needs, interests, and life situations – created “reflective knowledge” (Habermas, 1971, pp. 281–282) that then could be integrated voluntarily into daily routines. This acceptance, modification, and application by the patient represented a process like that of practitioners incorporating theory into practice while simultaneously respecting their freedom and discretion to adjust the professional norms to meet their unique contexts. Therefore, practitioners can set “limits [on] jurisdiction of technique” (Dunne, 1993, p. 187) and avoid the domination of praxis by technique. Moreover, praxis helps explain the “‘motivational resources’ and ‘structures of inner control’ [that]... make possible actions that are in accord with moral insight” (Dunne, 1993, p. 221). The practitioner, when choosing to implement the principles distilled through conversation, is displaying the “judgment and motivation, the psychological conditions [necessary] for translating morality into ethical life” (Habermas, 1984, p. 214). Thus, knowledge, being, and action amalgamate in the exercise of phronesis and underscore Dunne’s (1993) insistence that the Aristotelian concept of phronesis, which relies on deliberation or reflection in the implementation of knowledge and values in professional practice, remains relevant for modern philosophies of practice, given deliberation’s ability to resist the domination of practice by techniques created by those external to the professions.

**Dewey**

However, reflective practice’s origins are traced most frequently to Dewey’s (1933) admonition to examine pedagogical beliefs carefully to engage in reflective thought, which he defined as the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it
tends” (p. 6). By repeatedly examining fundamental assumptions about the educational process, instructors can avoid routine practice that repeats, rather than revises, inappropriate instruction forms, thereby implicitly complying with a “sausage machine” view of thinking (Dewey, 1933, p. 2) that inappropriately ignores professional contexts and the nontechnical nature of considering appropriate responses to such contexts (Eaton, 2016). Perhaps due to the title of his seminal work on reflection, How We Think, or his heavy reliance on logical (Jevons, 1872; Mill, 1884) and philosophical texts (Clifford, 1879), Dewey’s (1933) description of the reflective process often has been criticized as overly rationalistic and blind to emotions and intuition’s influence on the complex process of professional practice (Hébert, 2015).

Schön

Consequently, Schön (1983) articulated a more holistic notion of reflection that relied on tacit knowledge and could be used to examine practice during professional encounters (reflection in action) and after such events (reflection on action). Schön’s (1983) theory was developed as an alternative to the predominant theories of his time that encouraged professionals to follow stepwise procedures in a somewhat-automated fashion and “deploy … [their] techniques whatever the consequences” (p. 12). Another type of reflection commonly discussed in the literature is reflection for action, which can be categorized as an elaboration of Schön’s (1983) theory and refers to considering possible actions in future practice (Courcha, 2015), i.e., “prospective reflection” (Miller & Shifflet, 2016, p. 20). Schön’s (1983) description of reflective thought, as well as the elaborations of his description, consequently emphasized reflection’s multifaceted nature, which involves not only the intellect, but also the emotions, and can occur
before, during, and after lived experiences.

Kolb

Building on Schön’s (1983) theory, Kolb (2014) developed a reflection cycle involving action (concrete experience), perception (reflective observation), thought (abstract conceptualization), and application (active experimentation). A similar stepwise procedure often employed in the healthcare fields is the model developed by Gibbs (1988), comprising five questions that require the practitioner to describe the event (What happened?), as well as his or her emotions and cognitive processes during the event (What were you thinking and feeling?); provide an evaluation of the event (What was good or bad about the situation?); critique their own performance (What else could you have done?); and create an action plan for future similar occurrences (If this event happened again, what would you do?). Both Gibbs (1988) and Kolb’s (2014) descriptions of reflection provided instructors with a simple, stepwise method for teaching students to reflect on professional experiences and highlighted reflection’s continuous nature, through which professionals can develop their practice throughout their careers.

Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow (1990, 1991) often is discussed in overviews of reflective practice due to critical reflection’s centrality in his theory of transformative learning, and Tsingos, Bosnic-Anticevich, and Smith (2014) represented him as the final theorist of reflective practice. Mezirow (1990, 1991) viewed critical reflection as the process by which individuals examine their underlying epistemological, philosophical, and ethical beliefs to ascertain these assumptions’ validity. According to Mezirow (1990, 1991), critical reflection often occurs in dialogues with others and follows disorienting events (e.g., an unusual professional experience, such as an accepted instructional technique’s inefficacy or the death of a seemingly healthy patient) that cause these
individuals to question their prior assumptions. After engaging in critical reflection and dialogue, these individuals then experience perspective transformations that allow them to modify their core beliefs and assumptions in such a way as to integrate their newly acquired knowledge and experiences. The resulting perspective transformations alter how these professionals interact with their clients (e.g., students or patients), as well as society, and consequently change not only their professional practice, but also their surrounding cultures (Calleja, 2014).

**Pedagogical Tact**

Van Manen’s (2015) theory of pedagogical tact resembles Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning framework because pedagogical tact requires that practitioners continually reflect on and transform their practice to adapt to the dynamic contexts with which they are presented. Van Manen (1997a) developed his theory of pedagogical tact from Langeveld’s (1967, 1983) concept of phenomenological pedagogy, which exhorted educators to focus on children and students’ experience within the educational system, rather than theoretical constructs imposed upon these experiences. Therefore, Van Manen’s (2015) formulation of pedagogical tact emphasized the continuously adaptive nature of reflective practice, which requires a blend of “thoughtfulness and sensitivity” (p. 202) to the “ever-changing situations” (p. 202) of the student-teacher relationship and amplified Schön’s (1983) concern for reflection, both in and on action. Consequently, Hébert (2015), who critiqued both Dewey and Schön for bifurcating “knowledge and experience, at the expense of the latter” (p. 370), argued that van Manen’s (2015) concept of pedagogical tact more effectively combined reflection in and on action in a form of embodied knowing. Metaphors for reflective practice – such as traversing the unpredictable terrains of earth and sea (Dunne, 1993), riding a bicycle (Moore-Russo & Wilsey, 2014), or driving a vehicle (Eaton, 2016) – and comparisons of teaching to musical
improvisation (Westerlund, Partti, & Karlsen, 2015) and education to a bidirectional process in which both teachers and students influence the teaching endeavor (Cook-Sather, 2014), likewise, have highlighted the need for skillful practitioners who interact with professional situations in an intuitive and nonmechanical fashion. Therefore, Van Manen’s (2015) idea of pedagogical tact resembles a reflective state of being and action that occurs throughout the professional lifespan and cannot be reduced to a static acquired skill.

Theoretical Framework for My Research

This study’s framework relied on theorists frequently employed in studies about reflective practice, such as Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), but I attempted to advance theoretical understandings in this area by integrating less commonly employed theorists, such as Mezirow (1990, 1991) and van Manen (2015), as recommended by Collin et al. (2013) and suggested by Kreber’s (2014, 2015) critique of Schön (1983). Mezirow (1990, 1991) and Dewey (1933) frequently emphasized cognition’s role in reflection, but Mezirow (1990, 1991) highlighted the lasting influence of changed perspectives cultivated through reflection. Likewise, both Schön (1983) and van Manen (2015) highlighted intuitive or tacit knowledge’s role in reflective practice, but van Manen (2015) stressed the bidirectional dialogue between the educational practitioner and student in truly reflective practice, as well as the moral aspect of choosing the appropriate action for a given situation that Schön (1983) seemed to have overlooked (Kreber, 2015). Dunne’s (1993) characterization of Aristotelian deliberation also emphasized the reciprocal influence of practitioner and situation, which can be viewed as both agents and patients, given the influence of material on the final product of an artisan, the ongoing nature of meaningful knowledge that requires a “stable disposition” (Duune, 1993, p. 333) that is “constantly protected and maintained by good character” (Duune, 1993, p. 277), and the moral
nature of deliberative practice, which requires performing the right action “to the right person, to the right extent, at the right time, with the right motive, and in the right way, that is not for everyone, nor is it easy; wherefore goodness is both rare and laudable and noble” (Aristotle, 2009, p. 73). Therefore, my study’s theoretical framework (Figure 1) integrated the cognitive and intuitive aspects of reflection, but also stressed the ongoing transformation of professional behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge. Such an integrated framework portrays reflection as the consideration of spoken and unspoken beliefs before, during, and after professional practice situations, enabling practitioners to transform their practice and, thus, create authentic (Webster-Wright, 2013) and deliberate (Trede & McEwen, 2016) practices that effectively embody professed beliefs in actual behaviors.

**Related Literature**

The empirical literature has investigated methods of training future helping professionals in reflective practice, as well as outcomes that can be achieved through reflective activities. Instructional methods that were considered involved structured protocols for reflection, media-rich assignments, the arts, group discussions, and reflection facilitated by online platforms such as journals, e-portfolios, discussion boards, blogs, shared videos, web-conferencing platforms, chat sessions, social media, simulations, and wikis within fully or partially residential courses, as well as wholly online courses. Moreover, outcomes surveyed in the research have included self-efficacy, cultural awareness, emotional intelligence, and the development of professional identities. Current research gaps include examining the central purposes for and definition of reflection, presenting the views of those in helping professions other than education or healthcare, and investigating instructional practices in the online learning environment, in which increasing numbers of degrees are being offered completely via distance for religious leaders.
(ATS, 2018c), social workers (Moore et al., 2015), educators (Downing & Dyment, 2013), and healthcare providers (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2018; Gonzaga University, 2018).

**Methods**

The methods employed by instructors to expose students to reflection represent a variety of diverse learning styles possessed by students and, likewise, seek to elicit multifaceted views of professional practice held by individual students. For instance, opportunities for reflection reported in the literature have included structured protocols involving guided questions or stepwise procedures, video reflections in which students speak about their experiences, and portfolios of field experiences. Not only have such traditional forms of reflection been discussed in the literature, but more progressive methods of representation – such as creative writing, illustrated posters, poems, and films – also have served as platforms for reporting or encouraging students to reflect on their professional experience and beliefs. Finally, to draw on group discussion’s benefits, social forms of reflection, such as discussion boards and group dialogues, have been incorporated into courses on reflective practice. The sections below discuss these methods of instructing others in reflective practice in greater depth.

**Stepwise procedures and guiding questions.** Structured frameworks for reflection can help students better understand the concept of reflection but should be employed cautiously to avoid frustrating or discouraging future professionals. For example, student nurses who were shown the connections between reflective models, such as Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle and professional practice situations, benefited from the use of these reflective paradigms after clinical practice (Parrish & Crookes, 2014), while social work students participating in research by Testa and Egan (2015) were distracted by the somewhat-confusing terminology of deconstruction and
reconstruction found in Fook and Gardner’s (2007) guiding questions for reflection. Likewise, some Emirati students found the requirement to integrate theory into their reflections rather cumbersome, as they felt that their practicum experiences as teachers did not align necessarily with the theoretical frameworks surveyed in the course (Baker, 2014). Furthermore, instructors may want to balance the use of positive and negative experiences in reflective activities carefully. Two of the primary reflection theorists, Dewey (1933, 1938) and Schön (1983), as well as reflection scholars (Blomberg, Sherin, Renkl, Glogger, & Seidel, 2014; Clarà, 2015), have recommended utilizing occasions viewed as problematic for reflection, and students have viewed reflection on exclusively positive events to be artificial (Waters, Altus, & Wilkinson, 2013). Because students can become overly focused on negative experiences when allowed to choose topics for reflection (McGarr & McCormack, 2016), instructors have incorporated guiding questions for reflection that inquire not only about problematic situations, but also about successful experiences (e.g., Kuswandono, 2014; Marsh, 2014; Nash, 2011, 2014). Therefore, instructors may want to introduce students to the use of reflective frameworks in such a way as to avoid confusion and, likewise, to include both positive and negative events as fodder for reflection to deter excessively optimistic or pessimistic considerations of professional practice situations.

Multimedia. Offering students varied media through which they can reflect has proven beneficial when combined with appropriate scaffolding to ensure that students understand these multimodal assignments’ purpose. For instance, Corbin-Frazier and Eick (2015) asked preservice teachers to reflect on classroom situations in videos or in writing and connect these reflections to university benchmarks. Corbin-Frazier and Eick (2015) discovered that student teachers were better able to describe details of events in their written reflections, but were more skilled at
noting ways to improve classroom teaching in their video reflections, a finding that highlighted the value of multimedia in eliciting diverse types of information and echoed research by Adie and Tangen (2015), who found that preservice teachers realized their microteaching’s problematic aspects (e.g., standing behind the desk throughout a lecture or utilizing terminology that is inappropriate for English Language Learners) through the three strands of self-reflection on video, written feedback from peers, and audio-recorded feedback from instructors. However, preservice teachers specializing in early childhood or primary education had difficulty utilizing wiki spaces containing text, as well as audiovisual materials, because they did not understand the purpose of these portfolios, which were designed to be formative, rather than summative, assessments (Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014), and postgraduate physical therapy students resisted the requirement to create artwork because they were not given specific guidelines for their photos or drawings (Klappa, Klappa, & Burnsville, 2017). To allow for manageable flexibility, Domac et al. (2015) limited portfolio entries to written texts, but loosely structured these entries around interprofessional competencies necessary for health and social care professionals (e.g., attitudes toward collaboration, communication, and team-based care settings), and students found this reflection method to be helpful. By clearly communicating the purpose of multimedia spaces for reflection, instructors can evaluate students on a range of learning outcomes and, likewise, help students create high-quality, multifaceted representations of their professional experiences.

**Fine and performing arts.** The fine and performing arts have been used to cultivate professional imaginations, as well as elicit tacit beliefs about professional practice. The professional imagination (Dykstra, 2008; Eisner, 2001) allows individuals to envision alternative ways of interpreting or practicing their professions, and the arts have proven helpful in
cultivating this professional imagination. For example, teachers who engaged in creative writing could crystalize success narratives on positive classroom situations that they could use to transform problematic situations (Tyson, 2016), and students seeking credentials as school administrators portrayed their conceptions of ideal schools on illustrated posters, as well as plans for developing their placement schools into these ideal schools (Zur & Eisikovits, 2016).

Moreover, future instructors within higher education selected poems by educators whom they hoped either to emulate (e.g., the kind “Mrs. Krikorian,” by Sharon Olds) or shun, such as the jaded teacher in “Afternoon in School Last Lesson,” by D. H. Lawrence (Speare & Henshall, 2014). The arts also have helped nursing students articulate their views on social structures and supports’ appropriate role in mental health recovery through reflection on films, including One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and As Good As It Gets (McCann & Huntley-Moore, 2016).

Likewise, a community art fair enabled physical therapy students to become more aware of their vocational commitment by giving them the opportunity to portray their beliefs about physical therapy visually in artwork, such as drawings of quadriplegics who had received equestrian therapy (i.e., riding horses) and photos of athletes who felt like they were playing with two left feet, i.e., in a clumsy fashion (Klappa et al., 2017). Finally, artistic works such as body paint, watercolor prints, and quilts allowed medical students to reflect on the importance of caring for oneself. For example, one student created an image of the heart and linked the coronary circulation system that pumps blood to itself to the psychological and physical well-being necessary to practice medicine effectively (Cox, Brett-MacLean, & Courneya, 2016). In summary, the arts can provide students with opportunities to explore the actual, as well as the possible, to articulate and envision their professional ideals.
**Discussion and dialogue.** Group discussions can help foster transformative learning experiences by exposing students to alternative perspectives. For instance, Holbert (2015) found that midcareer teachers completing graduate degrees benefitted from discussing personal and professional issues with peers to develop alternative solutions to challenging situations, and preservice teachers from over 20 countries found that their peers’ alternative perspectives created dissonance that caused them to reflect on their views toward culture, diversity, and privilege (Acquah & Commins, 2015). Moreover, Tan (2013), in her research on preservice English teachers, found that some student teachers could transform their perspectives on practicum experiences only after dialoguing with peers in class discussions. However, such dialogues can be difficult to facilitate for students who currently are employed, as reported by Moen and Brown (2017), who found that healthcare professionals seeking a postgraduate degree often struggled to attend roundtable discussions modeled on the World Café method (World Café Community Foundation, 2015), resulting in rather disjointed conversations due to poor attendance, which created drastically varying group composition at each of the roundtable discussions (Moen & Brown, 2017). Additionally, Bain and Hyatt (2017) discovered that preservice teachers benefitted from playing a dialogic game involving worst-case scenarios collected from interviews with experienced art teachers and requiring them to determine appropriate responses to the scenarios. Through guided discussions, lecturers can expose students to perspectives that can stimulate critical reflection on beliefs and behaviors that directly impact professional practice.

**Online Reflection**

Reflection enhanced with online instructional methods has expanded further the people with whom students can reflect, how students can express their reflective insights, and the
experiences on which they can reflect. Online journals have allowed for communication primarily with instructors, while portfolios, discussion boards, and blogs have opened students’ reflections to peers, as well as casual readers being directed to blogs by search engines or shared links. Videos of practitioners and students in practice settings, likewise, have enhanced reflective discussions by helping students and instructors focus more on actions in the practice setting, rather than recollections of these actions during reflective conversations and written analyses of these video-recorded events. Videoconferences, chat forums, and social networking have broadened access further to those who can respond to students’ reflections and the ways in which conversation partners can interact (e.g., nonverbally or synchronously), and have created real-time experiences that comprise grist for the reflective mill. Simulations and wikis also have provided experiences on which students can reflect by presenting them with virtual environments in which they can enact their roles as helping professionals through avatars or collaborate with peers. The primary difficulties encountered by students and professors utilizing online reflection have concerned communication and technological challenges, while the advantages have been accommodating a wide range of learning styles, personalities, and practicum settings. Therefore, web-assisted reflection’s trajectory has moved from presenting students solely with an opportunity to receive feedback from instructors to one in which they can dialogue with peers, service users, and field-site supervisors, as well as participate in activities on which they then can reflect. Although more sophisticated technologies have diversified discussions and experiences, they simultaneously have presented challenges that merit consideration prior to widespread implementation.

**Journals.** Online journals have allowed students to communicate with their instructors about field-site experiences that have occurred off campus and have raised personal learning
needs not always addressed in the practicum setting. For example, online journals shared with university instructors have provided a platform for students to integrate academic content with observed outdoor educational activities (Dyment, Downing, Hill, & Smith, 2018), develop professional identities of practice focusing on individualized social care (Bruno & Dell’Aversana, 2018), disagree with practicum-setting supervisors who neglect to notify authorities about violent spouses of safe-house guests (Pack, 2014), and describe ways in which they integrate spiritual practices, such as prayer in their social work practice (Jensen-Hart, Shuttleworth, & Davis, 2014). Therefore, journals have been used to create a safe space in which students can discuss issues privately with their instructors and offset the perspectives provided by their practicum contexts.

**Electronic portfolios.** Conversely, electronic portfolios more frequently have been designed to familiarize students with professional competencies and provide a channel for feedback not only from course evaluators, but also from peers. Portfolios have been structured around professional competencies for seminary students to highlight their leadership abilities throughout their degree program (Walker, 2014), for Malaysian preservice teachers of English as a Second Language to align observations of classroom instruction to Quality Teaching Standards (Nambiar, 2018), for students majoring in early childhood and primary education to verify their achievement of the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers (Oakley, Pegrum, & Johnston, 2014), for medical students recording observations of 60 specialty clinical areas at a family practice facility (Shaughnessy, Allen, & Duggan, 2017), for future school counselors and school psychologists achieving standards outlined by relevant state and federal accrediting bodies (Wakimoto & Lewis, 2014), and for future educators reaching their personal learning goals, such as classroom community building (Liu, 2017). Although portfolios can help students
demonstrate competencies achieved during field placements, feedback from instructors and peers is necessary to balance self-assessed competencies. Instructors of Turkish preservice teachers completing field placement courses provided feedback on portfolios (Merc, 2015), and Liu (2017) found that preservice teachers needed such feedback, as they sometimes overestimated their ability to cultivate the classroom community, as illustrated by one teacher who expressly stated that a disruptive student “should not be included” (p. 813) in a skit performed by the students during an assembly on bullying. However, such feedback was viewed as unhelpful by medical students when confined to superficial issues such as grammar (Arntfield, Parlett, Meston, Apramian, & Lingard, 2016), and perhaps especially irritating, as students were required to reply to this instructor’s feedback in writing. Students of education, likewise, have expressed appreciation for comments supplied by their peers on their portfolios (Carl & Strydom, 2017) and explicitly have requested feedback from peers when not included in a course for preservice teachers (Oakley et al., 2014). Medical students have been allowed to restrict portfolio entries that receive feedback from peers and instructors by marking only certain entries as public, and such a procedure may make students more receptive to feedback because it is viewed as solicited, rather than imposed (Shaughnessy et al., 2017). Regardless of the feedback source, input on portfolio reflections has proven necessary to offset the monologue presented in exclusively private portfolios structured around professional competencies.

**Discussion boards.** Discussion boards most frequently have been used to cultivate conversations among students to complement other course assignments, including field placements, private journaling, and classroom dialogues. For instance, discussion boards have helped ministry students on placements develop alternative perspectives on challenges encountered while serving congregations, such as improving worship services by collaborating
with, rather than authoritatively directing, parishioners (Hatcher, 2013). Additionally, they have been utilized to provide socioemotional support to pastoral counseling students, who were cultivating self-care habits for sustainable ministries (Doehring, 2013), and also allowed preservice teachers to integrate theoretical concepts with classroom experiences through WhatsApp chat messages delivered as a platform for group discussions (Choo, Onn, Nawi, & Abdullah, 2016). However, Jones and Ryan (2014) noted students’ preference for unstructured discussion board topics, rather than those that required integration of theoretical concepts. Not only have discussion boards provided a counterpoint to practical assignments, but they also have provided a venue for considering a broader range of topics than those discussed in private journals on social service placement experiences (Smit & Tremethick, 2017); to discuss teaching experiences in detail, rather than the cursory nature sometimes prevalent in group discussions via video conferences (Salter, Douglas, & Kember, 2017); and to tailor discussions to individual needs, rather than those of lecturers who sometimes view the classroom as a performance stage rather than a forum for dialogue (Fryar, 2015). Despite the advantages of reflective discussions with peers, students have expressed fears that peers would judge or misunderstand their posts, given the absence of nonverbal cues in the written word that they have felt better able to convey in face-to-face settings (Testa & Egan, 2015). Instructors have tried to alleviate such concerns by allowing students to mark certain entries as private (Shaughnessy et al., 2017), requesting that students email them privately about theological insights concerning forgiveness or the Creator (Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, & Polaski, 2011), and modeling authentic, yet caring, communication (Swart, 2016). When such caring environments are created, discussion boards enable students to balance their practical assignments, which often occur off campus, with theoretical insights, socioemotional support, and alternative perspectives to discuss a broader
range of topics than those presented in private journals, or conversely, a more restricted range of
topics than those emerging from residential group dialogues.

**Blogs.** Blogs, like discussion boards, have created spaces where students can interact
with peers to describe or develop solutions to challenges encountered in field placements, as well
as receive socioemotional support to withstand and learn from such challenges. Blogs have been
utilized by seminary students following political advocacy activities in Colombia (Lockwood-
Stewart, 2017), recommended as a means for developing ministerial leadership abilities
(Cartwright, 2017), and, in a way that might be incorporated in graduate schools of theology,
recommended as a form of alternative assessment for undergraduate theology students who want
to implement learning in their local congregations and communities after reflecting on course
readings (Oliver, 2013, 2015). Moreover, preservice teachers, through blogging, have articulated
beneficial strategies – such as educating, rather than simply gratifying – students (Garza &
Smith, 2015), as well as discovering culture’s role in social work practice (Marchant, Germak, &
Berzin, 2018). Similarly, blogging has helped students realize strategies for overcoming
difficulties encountered while on placement. For instance, students have sought, as well as
received, helpful suggestions for problems described in their blog postings (Brett, 2017; Bruster
& Peterson, 2013; van Wyk, 2013), such as strategies for bypassing needlessly restrictive
Internet filters while completing practicums in K-12 virtual schools (Jackson & Jones, 2017) or
collaboratively drafting service learning projects to address gender-based violence in South
African undergraduate nursing education courses (Boltman-Binkowski & Julie, 2014). Students
also have appreciated the socioemotional support provided by peers while discussing spiritual
issues concerning a patient’s death (Reed & Edmunds, 2015), although Jones and Ryan (2014)
noted that instructors should offset the almost exclusively socioemotional posts provided by
peers by referencing relevant theoretical constructs. However, such comments may become burdensome for instructors needing to reply to large numbers of blog posts (Hattersley, 2014), as well as challenging for adjunct instructors who often fear consequences from negative comments on student evaluations (Nash, 2015), or for residential instructors who have been enculturated in an institution that has expressed a “preference for pleasantries” (Ramani et al., 2017, p. 153) and, thus, has shunned honest feedback on residents’ competence levels. Although students, and sometimes instructors, have been encouraged to perpetuate the somewhat-smothering “culture of niceness” (Daniel, Auhl, & Hastings, 2013, p. 166), in which caring for others means being noncritical, some instructors have counterbalanced this tendency toward banality by providing students with guidelines for evaluating their peers’ blogs (Brett, 2017), as well as allowing students to post feedback on blogs anonymously (Lin, 2018). Thus, blogs have fostered peer interactions that have helped students articulate and develop techniques for overcoming difficulties in their field practicums, but sometimes have overindulged students by tolerating exclusively positive replies to blog posts.

Videos. Online videos of practitioners have assisted future helping professionals by presenting them with role models for navigating complex decisions and with opportunities to develop their beliefs about practice. For example, videos of practicing professionals have demonstrated reflection in action by featuring social workers considering the removal of a child from “a remote Aboriginal community” (Bowers & Pack, 2017, p. 102) due to malnutrition alongside the agency flowchart illustrating appropriate procedures and policies that may necessitate inspecting cupboards and refrigerators for available food (Bowers & Pack, 2017; Pack, 2016). Medical students, through a similar platform, viewed videos of physicians interviewing patients, wrote reflections on ways in which their decisions about care would have
differed from the featured doctor, and received automated feedback on their reflections (Salminen, Zary, Björklund, Toth-Pal, & Leanderson, 2014). Preservice teachers, as discussed by Cho and Huang (2014), also have reflected on children and instructors in the classroom in wiki spaces to develop their beliefs about mathematical content knowledge (e.g., mathematics as a set of interrelated concepts), as well as how children learn about math (e.g., understanding processes prior to learning the steps required to apply these processes). Theological educators may be able to craft analogous reflective processes for ministry students through courses designed to analyze online videos of sermons, such as the ones analyzed by Bryan and Albakry (2016), who unearthed the numerous ways in which a megachurch pastor connected with his online audience by asking them to raise their hands or pray, as well as using inclusive pronouns such as “we” (p. 691) to create a feeling of unity and closeness between him and his congregants.

Online videos of students also have been utilized to empower students to be active participants in supervisory conversations, develop their skills, and present multidimensional representations of practicums completed in locations far from campus. Preservice teachers, who posted written reflections and videos of their classroom instruction online prior to supervisory conversations, became more active participants in supervisory conversations by developing solutions to challenges encountered, rather than passively accepting their supervisors’ suggestions, perhaps because these videos, rather than recollections of events from the preservice teacher and overseeing instructor’s perspective, became the focus of their discussions (Baecher & McCormack, 2015). Moreover, future educators improved their reflective abilities when supplied with guidelines for evaluating video recordings of their lessons (Nagro, deBettencourt, Rosenberg, Carran, & Weiss, 2017), identifying strengths and weaknesses in their own and others’ teaching through reflections on videos of their teaching posted on discussion boards (Lau
& Chan, 2017), as well as appreciating positive aspects of their teaching through annotations supplied by their peers on shared videos of their classroom instructions to balance their own excessively negative written reflections in journals (Kleinknecht & Gröschner, 2016). Nonetheless, preservice teachers have been criticized for providing only supportive video annotations on their peers’ teaching videos (Ellis, McFadden, Anwar, & Roehrig, 2015), as well as focusing on themselves, rather than their students, when reflecting individually with video-annotation software (McFadden, Ellis, Anwar, & Roehrig, 2014). Shared online videos also have connected preservice teachers completing practicums in remote, Australian communities to university supervisors from whom they have received feedback on their placement teaching (Cooper, 2015; Phillipson, Cooper, & Phillipson, 2015), as well as preservice teachers completing a fully online practicum to peers with whom they reflected on videos of their classroom teaching (Lilienthal, Potthoff, & Anderson, 2017). Social work students similarly have reflected and received feedback on role-playing videos conducted through Zoom videoconferencing software supplemented with VideoAnt annotation tools (Fitch, Cary, & Freese, 2016), and psychiatric nurses have composed reflections about and received comments on videos on patient-interviewing skills shared on YouTube (Lai, 2016). Future ministers, likewise, have presented videos and photomontages of their field education sites in residential classes (Baard, 2017), and ordained clergy have reflected on videos of their sermons presented on parish websites through guided awareness to understand how preaching has helped them grow spiritually (Schuhmann, 2016). Thus, shared videos have created opportunities for future helping professionals to develop their skills, increase their awareness of strengths and weaknesses, and help colleagues improve their interactions with clients.
Videoconferences. Videoconferences have resembled discussion boards and blogs by allowing future helping professionals to dialogue with instructors, but they also have engaged practicum supervisors or peers within and outside students’ home institutions and allowed for synchronous communication. Mental health nursing students completing clinical placements participated in critical reflection on their experiences through eight weekly videoconferencing sessions with academic lecturers, and while these conferences allowed students to benefit from experiences in diverse clinical settings (e.g., community mental health services, as well as hospitals) and helped them better understand patients’ perspectives, training rooms in which students could access Skype for the videoconferences were available in only two of the placements, leading to potential breaches of patient privacy for those who logged into their own devices or computers in unspecified locations (Hardy, Mushore, & Goddard, 2016).

Occupational therapy students completing rural placements similarly participated in weekly videoconferencing sessions completed over 12 months with peers and instructors in which they would reflect on their placement experiences and receive training on various occupational therapy techniques, but sometimes felt excluded from videoconferencing sessions that discussed topics outside their specialty areas (Furness & Kaltner, 2015). Applied psychology students who reflected on clinical experiences similarly expressed frustration that videoconferences with peers and instructors included lectures that they noted could have been prerecorded and viewed asynchronously to allow for more time to discuss issues arising during their practicum experiences (Wilcox & Lock, 2017). Videoconferences also have facilitated dialogue between future helping professionals completing practicum experiences in online settings. For instance, cooperating teachers for online teaching experiences in K-12 virtual schools held biweekly web conferences with preservice secondary teachers who then reflected on these web conferences, as
well as their overall experiences in residential sessions with university instructors (Faucette & Nugent, 2015). Moreover, future nurse practitioners completing simulated clinical placements wrote reflections while completing online activities and subsequently dialogued through weekly WebEx conferences with a facilitating preceptor and peers (Gordon, 2017). Thus, videoconferences devoted to placement experiences have enabled students to enrich their practicums by viewing their placement supervisors’ verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as their peers from whom they may be separated physically.

Web conferencing platforms also have connected students with peers enrolled in online sections of their residential courses, as well as students enrolled in institutions located in other countries. For instance, students completing residential sessions of a course on reflective practice connected virtually with their online peers via Skype on iPads distributed throughout the classroom (Cunningham, 2014). However, residential students resented the time devoted to addressing virtually connected peers’ needs, disliked the irritating quality of peers’ voices as transmitted by the iPads, and felt relieved when they could relegate them to a corner of the table during small group sessions, in which they received minimal attention. Sadly, Cunningham (2014) chose to move the entire class online to avoid such complaints despite her research being one of the few studies, other than Rudolph et al. (2017), to bring together, rather than segregate, residential and online students, given the potential for Kubi or Double Robotics’ telepresence devices to act as robot or proxy students and, thus, improve the aesthetic features of distance student participation (Gleason & Greenhow, 2017; Lieberman, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2017). Additionally, future helping professionals attending institutions in other countries have been connected through videoconferencing. For example, preservice teachers enrolled in U.S. and Macedonian universities discussed issues such as monoethnic classrooms devised to separate
Orthodox Christians from Muslims, compared with multicultural U.S. classrooms; protests concerning the initiation of high school exit exams in contrast to the acceptance of standardized testing in U.S. schools; and technology resources available to educators in the two settings (Clark et al., 2016). By reflecting on their diverse contexts, these teachers began to appreciate the resources within their current classrooms, as well as envision the schools that they hoped to establish in the future that integrated desired aspects of schools worldwide. On the other hand, counseling students began to appreciate the similarities in patient profiles in the U.S. and United Kingdom, where traditionally rugged personalities, dubbed “Montana cowboy” types (Meekums, Wathen, & Koltz, 2017, p. 242), and other individuals with a “stiff upper lip” (Meekums et al., 2017, p. 242) strongly resembled one another in their seeming desire to avoid seeking help for emotionally and psychologically difficult experiences. Consequently, reflection on practical experiences through videoconferencing effectively connected online students in diverse international contexts, but only seems to have further divided residential and online students enrolled in courses on reflective practice.

**Chat and social networking.** Chat and social networking platforms have further expanded the pool of people with whom future helping professionals can reflect to include service users, and they have further broadened the use of online platforms to create experiences on which students could then reflect. For instance, chat sessions hosted in TodaysMeet have allowed preservice teachers studying in Illinois to chat with urban high schoolers from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in Los Angeles to better understand the lives of students whom they may encounter in their classrooms through discussions about their use of slang terms, such as “XP” (Seglem & Garcia, 2015, p. 20), or inconsequential banter in which they engaged about peers being lost in the hallway prior to initiating more significant
discussions. Social work students attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) and those attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) also benefitted from a live, one-hour Twitter chat session on the Black Lives Matter movement and recent police shootings of African American youths (Brady, Sawyer, & Crawford-Herrera, 2016). Although the chat session and follow-up Skype group discussion did not alter the students’ views, as explained in their reflections, they did appreciate being able to understand the reasoning of those with diverse views on definitions of privilege, including definitions that extended beyond racial or ethnic identities to embrace socioeconomic status, gender, and similar personal characteristics.

Furthermore, Twitter has been utilized by undergraduates studying Biblical hermeneutics, exposing them to diverse interpretations of the Gospel of Mark being read aloud by allowing them to view a Twitterfall (i.e., livestream of tweets) of reader responses posted as tweets by individuals of varying denominational affiliations and socioeconomic settings. These students subsequently composed reflective essays in which they compared two of the tweeted responses (Williamson, 2013), and such reflective exercises may be useful by helping those preparing to become religious leaders to appreciate the multitude of meanings and emotions that readers and listeners of Scriptural texts experience. Chat sessions also have allowed pastoral counseling students to reflect on and role-play scenarios – such as a Vietnamese woman in New Orleans reconciling her Confucian and Catholic traditions, as described in a short story (Doehring, 2011), or a white pastor speaking with a Hispanic congregant having difficulty finding affordable housing (McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014) – and future nurse educators to reflect on their prior experiences in classrooms, including anxieties over oral exams, as well as teachers reflecting, who thereby learned to respect children from all social levels and understood the course content (Parigi et al., 2015). Therefore, chat sessions have exposed future helping professionals to some
of the diverse perspectives that they may encounter in future practice situations, as well as created experiences on which they can reflect and provide a somewhat-novel platform for reflection.

Asynchronous dialogues on social media platforms also have facilitated reflective practice and have created experiences on which students can reflect. For example, instructors asked preservice teachers completing practicums, as well as former students in the course, to post Twitter messages on teaching ideas, course materials, and “ah-ha! moments” (Benko, Guise, Earl, & Gill, 2016, p. 15), from which the preservice teachers then created stories reflecting their development throughout their field site experience. Lester (2014) also has described using social media as a platform for reflection on significant issues such as “Does the universe tend toward justice?” (p. 224) to stimulate reflection on course readings and personal experiences, given the abbreviated size of Twitter posts, which still were restricted to 140 characters when the article was published. Platforms such as Facebook and Edmodo have supplied future helping professionals with further opportunities to reflect on field site experiences. For instance, preservice teachers posted on Edmodo regarding their placement experiences, and those who did more than describe events received more positive reactions from peers than those who reflected in a very limited sense (Krutka, Bergman, Flores, Mason, & Jack, 2014). Israeli social work students completing practicums in India posted on Facebook, the more well-known platform on which Edmodo is modeled, concerning their emerging identities as globally minded social workers and noted ways in which they were like Meir Banai, whose lyrics they were quoting: “I walk among them and then come back.... I have some of this and some of that ... I have both of them” (Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017, p. 146). Finally, email conversations that resembled such asynchronous social media conversations have created experiences on which preservice
teachers could later reflect. Philadelphia high school students connected through weekly email conversations with preservice teachers who then drafted reflective essays on their overall experience dialoguing with urban youths through digital media, causing one preservice teacher to comment on her inappropriate domination during some of the email exchanges that she corrected after realizing her error (Cook-Sather, 2017). Thus, asynchronous conversations on social media platforms and synchronous chat sessions have created venues for reflection and formed experiences that have served as fodder for reflection to expose students to diverse perspectives, as well as fashion unique experiences on which these students of the helping professions then reflected.

**Simulations.** Simulations have created experiences on which future teachers, healthcare providers, and social workers subsequently have reflected to improve their skills and clarify their understandings of relevant ethical principles through animations of classroom events and multi-user virtual environments, such as Second Life. For example, preservice algebra teachers reflected on animations of teachers instructing others and noticed behaviors to avoid in their own instruction, such as ignoring valid questions; humiliating students by describing their questions as simplistic, thereby reflecting poorly on the student’s intelligence; and explaining algebraic concepts in overly complex language, yet rarely referencing educational theories in their reflective discussion board posts (Moore-Russo & Wilsey, 2014). Virtual worlds similarly have been employed to help preservice teachers participate in events on which they have then reflected. For instance, preservice teachers have role-played parent-teacher conferences in Second Life, allowing them to understand the importance of dialoguing with parents about students prior to proposing solutions to perceived problems in students’ progress (Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015); honed pedagogical techniques by instructing peers in Singularity Viewer
(Pappa & Papadima-Sophocleous, 2016); and trialed instructional techniques for diverse students in a platform similar to SimSchool without suffering the consequences that erroneous decisions may have in supervised field settings (Manburg, Moore, Griffin, & Seperson, 2017). Moreover, future nurses have advanced their communication skills by interacting with simulated patients in Shadow Health and debriefing with a preceptor via WebEx (Gordon, 2017); reflected on their performance, which was mediated through telepresence within simulations (Rudolph et al., 2017); and honed their care practices by reflecting on online videos of their performance in emergency situations with mannequin patients (Shortridge, McPherson, & Loving, 2014). Social work students also have reflected on videos of their interactions with mannequin clients being interviewed to assess, for example, mental confusion and overall well-being due to concerns raised by family members (Dodds, Heslop, & Meredith, 2018). Moreover, an innovative project for social work students in Second Life helped students consider ethical issues by asking them to work in small groups to save plane crash victims in a socially just manner, as well as providing them with opportunities to experience discrimination based on randomly assigned objects attached to their avatars that prohibited them from purchasing food for their families (Reinsmith-Jones, Kibbe, Crayton, & Campbell, 2015). Although simulated experiences seem less prevalent in training programs for religious leaders, virtual reality has been proposed as a means of engaging millennials studying theology and religion (Bauman, Marchal, McLain, O'Connell, & Patterson, 2014), with virtual sanctuaries having been created in Second Life by Life Church (Kay, 2016) and by Anglican bishops in New Zealand that allow users to worship in a Gothic cathedral (Hutchings, 2015). While the Catholic Church has not yet endorsed a specific space within Second Life, perhaps due to lingering theological difficulties concerning virtual wafers and wine’s efficacy in simulated Communion experiences (French, 2018; Geraci, 2014),
independent Catholics have developed the Campivallensis Catholic Meditation Center, which provides a quiet space in which to consider significant issues (Bosch, Sanz, Abelló, Torrents, & Gauxachs, 2017; Geraci, 2014). Simulated sacred spaces such as these may be useful in crafting experiences for seminarians to rehearse welcoming visitors, delivering sermons, baptizing new believers (French, 2018; Swindler, 2018), leading worship services, or simply experiencing a religious context outside their current denominational or congregational settings. Therefore, virtual worlds have provided future helping professionals with opportunities to rehearse their roles as educators, healthcare providers, or social workers, and perhaps can be used in a similar manner with those seeking theological training.

**Wikis.** Students have used wikis to reflect on experiences, as well as to participate in collaborative learning events on which they subsequently reflect. For example, preservice teachers, who recorded videos of science-enrichment activities they provided for elementary students, utilized wiki spaces to reflect on these videos with peers and instructors, but found the wiki platform somewhat confusing due to the multitude of links and options available on the wiki platform (Wegner, Remmert, & Ohlberger, 2017). However, wiki spaces primarily have been used to create collaborative learning experiences for students, which they reflected on afterward. For instance, preservice teachers viewed videos on instructional situations in elementary mathematical classrooms and subsequently reflected on aspects of pedagogy exhibited in these videos to draft group reflections in a wiki, an experience that changed the future educators’ perceptions of mathematics and students, but not relevant instructional techniques (Cho & Huang, 2014). Similarly, preservice teachers collaboratively designed interdisciplinary resources for educating students about science in a wiki space and, through this experience, as noted in their reflections, began to better appreciate their future colleagues’
talents, as well as the importance of negotiation skills and problem-based learning (Biasutti & El-Deghaidy, 2015). Other helping professionals also have participated in group learning activities on which they reflected, including physiotherapy students who created exercise plans with healthcare providers from other fields in an interdisciplinary wiki and noted, in reflective journals, the importance of collaboration, as well as the enhanced learning opportunities provided by interacting with those outside their specialty areas (Cunningham, O'Donoghue, & Jennings, 2016). Although future clergy have not been featured in recent literature on reflection through wikis, undergraduates studying Biblical interpretation completed group commentaries on selected scripture passages in wikis (Delamarter, Gravett, Ulrich, Nysse, & Polaski, 2011), and such an activity may help future religious leaders complete reflective assignments. Thus, wiki spaces have allowed future helping professionals to collaborate with peers inside and outside their disciplines to reflect on their teaching practices or specific learning materials, such as videos of teaching incidents, as well as collaboratively develop care plans and educational activities.

The above sections described reflection involving an online component (e.g., online journal or video) to demonstrate the Internet’s capabilities in helping students learn about reflective practice. To clarify the course structures’ exact nature, including these methods of instruction enhanced by online technologies, Table 1 categorizes the online components helping students learn reflection, as well as the format for the courses based on Allen and Seaman’s (2017) categories for online education. This table includes only articles describing instruction in reflection for future helping professionals; therefore, references in the above section to possibilities for instructing future clergy in reflection (e.g., Williamson, 2013) are not included in the table. When the course’s exact structure could not be determined from the article’s text, I
contacted the authors by email to verify the instruction’s nature, as many authors focused primarily on the topic of research, as opposed to the course’s structure. This table highlights that many of the articles investigating reflection included at least some face-to-face instruction that either introduced students to the technology used for reflection (e.g., Carl & Strydom, 2017; Cho & Huang, 2014; Lai, 2016; Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015; Wakimoto & Lewis, 2014) or facilitated the experience on which reflections would be based (Dodds et al., 2018; Shortridge et al., 2014).

The prevalence of courses involving at least some residential instruction may be related to many institutions’ reluctance to offer fully online degrees for the helping professions and the corresponding small number of wholly online degrees available within professions, such as religious leadership (ATS, 2018c), education (Downing & Dyment, 2013), social work (Moore et al., 2015), and healthcare (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2018; Gonzaga University, 2018). Nonetheless, the online environment seems promising for teaching, as it has facilitated communication about reflection between instructors and students separated by large distances (e.g., Dyment et al., 2018; Hatcher, 2013; Lilienthal et al., 2017), as well as created experiences on which students can reflect (e.g., Manburg et al., 2017; Pappa & Papadima-Sophocleous, 2016).

Table 1

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Online Reflection</th>
<th>Online Course</th>
<th>Hybrid Course</th>
<th>Residential Course</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Portfolios</td>
<td>Merc, 2015; Nambiar, 2018; Walker, 2014</td>
<td>Liu, 2017; Oakley et al., 2014</td>
<td>Carl &amp; Strydom, 2017; Arntfield et al., 2016; Shaughnessy et al., 2017; Wakimoto &amp; Lewis, 2014</td>
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<td>Category</td>
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<td>Discussion Boards</td>
<td>Hatcher, 2013; Salter et al., 2017; Swart, 2016; Jones &amp; Ryan, 2014; Testa &amp; Egan, 2015; Corrie, 2013; Smit &amp; Tremethick, 2017</td>
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<td>Blogs</td>
<td>Brett, 2017; Jackson &amp; Jones, 2017; Oliver, 2013; van Wyk, 2013; Marchant et al., 2018; Boltman-Binkowski &amp; Julie, 2014; Bruster &amp; Peterson, 2013; Garza &amp; Smith, 2015; Hattersley, 2014; Lin, 2018; Reed &amp; Edmunds, 2015</td>
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<td>Videos</td>
<td>Fitch et al., 2016; Lilenthal et al., 2017; McFadden et al., 2014; Bowers &amp; Pack, 2017; Cooper, 2015; Cho &amp; Huang, 2014; Phillipson, Cooper, &amp; Phillipson, 2015; Baecher &amp; McCormack, 2015; Dodds et al., 2018; Kleinknecht &amp; Gröschner, 2016; Lai, 2016; Nagro et al., 2017; Shortridge et al., 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Videoconferences</td>
<td>Cunningham, 2014; Gordon, 2017; Furness &amp; Kaltner, 2015; Wilcox &amp; Lock, 2017; Hardy et al., 2016; Clark, Brown, &amp; Jandildinov, 2017; Faucette &amp; Nugent, 2015; Meekums et al., 2017</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chat and Social Networking</td>
<td>Mcgarrah-Sharp &amp; Morris, 2014; Benko et al., 2016; Brady et al., 2016; Cook-Sather, 2017; Krutka et al., 2014; Parigi et al., 2015; Ranz &amp; Nuttman-Shwartz, 2014; Seglem &amp; Garcia, 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simulations</td>
<td>Manburg et al., 2017; Pappa &amp; Papadima-Sophocleous, 2016; Rudolph et al., 2017; Moore-Russo &amp; Wiley, 2014; Puvirajah &amp; Calandra, 2015; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikis</td>
<td>Biasutti &amp; El-Deghaidy, 2015;</td>
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Challenges of teaching reflection online. Challenges encountered by students and instructors while teaching and learning about reflective practice through online delivery systems have included difficulties with technology and communication across geographically separated spaces. Complex reflective platforms such as wikis (O’Connell & Dyment, 2016; Wegner et al., 2017) and e-portfolios often have befuddled students due to the numerous options available in these venues (Carl & Strydom, 2017; Merc, 2015; Oakley et al., 2014) and have frustrated supervisors who could not access the e-portfolios at field sites due to restricted Internet access, requiring them to ask for printed portfolios from students (Venville, Cleak, & Bould, 2017). However, confusion concerning the platform for reflection may be alleviated by exposing students to technology early in the course (Wakimoto & Lewis, 2014) or using the same platform across several years of a degree program (Er, Ming, Keng, & Nadarajah, 2018). Videos of practice settings as fodder for reflection, likewise, have posed problems for students, as some administrators may not welcome video cameras in classrooms (Cooper, 2015; Phillipson et al., 2015). Moreover, videoconferencing platforms have been criticized for poor sound quality during Skype sessions (Cunningham, 2014; Hardy et al., 2016), limited or intermittent Internet access in international (Fox, 2017) or rural placements (Gronn, Romeo, McNamara, & Teo, 2013), and difficulties coordinating meeting times across time zones (Wilcox & Lock, 2017). The cost of learning management systems – such as Blackboard or Canvas, which host reflective assignments – also may be a challenge for some institutions (Brito, 2017; Kim, 2017; Piña, Lowell, & Harris, 2017), but perhaps can be addressed by using inexpensive or freely available resources, such as shared documents (Doehring, 2013) or videos (Cooper, 2015; Phillipson et al.,
2015) stored on Google Drive, portfolios created on Google (Wakimoto & Lewis, 2014) or Mahara (Er et al., 2018) sites, reflective posts submitted through WhatsApp instant messaging (Choo et al., 2016) or WordPress blogs (Brett, 2017), and experiences for reflection created in wiki spaces (Cunningham et al., 2016). Computer-mediated communication also can pose difficulties for reflective assignments given the challenges of ensuring agreement between the field site and university expectations for coursework (Lubke, 2016), the lack of nonverbal cues in written reflections conveyed by email (Arntfield et al., 2016), the increased time commitment for online courses required for students completing role-plays online (Stanley-Clarke, English, & Yeung, 2018), and instructors creating or grading reflections through online platforms (Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015). Clearly, the technology employed for reflection, as well as the communication limitations between individuals separated by time and space, have complicated instruction in reflective practice through online platforms.

Additional challenges also noted in the literature relate to concerns about submitted reflections’ authenticity and methods of preserving clients and students’ privacy. Concerns about reflections’ authenticity have been raised, given the association of discussing mistakes with confessing sins in Western contexts steeped in Christian traditions (Wenger et al., 2017), some Christians’ reluctance to critique their faith in online fora at theologically conservative institutions due to fears of judgment by peers or instructors (Crane, 2016), and students’ ability to neglect implementing suggestions that they describe for improving their practice (Allaire, 2015). Moreover, students have expressed reservations in discussing potentially embarrassing events in their reflections, as those reviewing their assignments may serve on residency-selection committees (Arntfield et al., 2016) or job interview panels (Brown et al., 2013). On the other hand, online reflections may become too authentic and, thus, compromise patients or clients’
privacy unless great care is exercised to abide by organizational and professional standards of ethical practice (Beaumont, Chester, & Rideout, 2017), or if shared in spaces where, for instance, family members or children may overhear teleconferencing conversations with supervisors and peers (Sawrikar et al., 2015). Student reflections also may jeopardize their own privacy if they post embarrassing information about themselves or field site supervisors in public spaces, such as Xanga blogs or Twitter feeds (Blevins, 2015), or provide information for learning-analytics software that harms their personal or professional interests and concerns due to lax institutional policies regarding the use of data stored in learning-management systems (Pardo & Siemens, 2014). Consequently, online reflections have been criticized for being either superficial and meaningless due to excessive concerns about those with access to reflections, or inappropriately honest and, therefore, harmful to service users, as well as students.

**Advantages of online reflection.** The benefits associated with teaching reflective practice online have included instructors’ ability to accommodate a wide range of learning styles and personalities, widen the pool of dialogue partners for shared reflections, and create unique placement opportunities unavailable in courses conducted residentially. Computer-mediated communication has helped professors offer arenas for reflection that best meet various learning styles’ needs, such as pragmatist or theorist, in e-portfolios with elective elements (Nielsen, Pedersen, & Helms 2015), and visual learners, who appreciate being able to embed images or videos in reflective blogs (Brett, 2017). Furthermore, Salter et al. (2017) found that text-centric discussion board posts were more focused than video conferencing dialogues. Additionally, introverted (Enochsson, 2018; Hess, 2014; Ramshaw, 2011) or self-conscious (ATS, 2018c) students sometimes have expressed themselves better in written reflections, rather than spoken ones in live class discussions, and other students, as well as instructors, have appreciated the
individualized instruction that may be lacking in brick-and-mortar classroom discussions (Fryar, Wilcox, Hilton, & Rich, 2018; Hattersley, 2014). Sawrikar et al. (2015) noted web-based instruction’s potential to highlight the strengths of professors who may lack personal charisma that would enable them to flourish in residential settings, but nonetheless possess the ability to attend closely to details (Sawrikar et al., 2015) or apply relevant pedagogical principles (Cartwright, 2017) that may allow them to excel in digital learning contexts. Online instruction similarly has broadened the conversation partners with whom students can reflect by bringing together in group discussions peers residing in other countries (Clark et al., 2016; Meekums et al., 2017), peers completing practicums in a variety of field settings (Hardy et al., 2016; Swart, 2016), classmates unable to attend residential courses due to familial or professional obligations (Dyment et al., 2018), and K-12 students, who may be reticent about honestly expressing their concerns in offline interactions, given the traditional hierarchies in which many of them have been educated (Cook-Sather, 2017). Finally, online education in reflective practice has allowed students to complete practicums in a variety of placement settings, such as rural locations far from campus (Jones & Ryan, 2014; Redmond, 2015) and in international contexts (Fox, 2017). Moreover, online practicums have enabled students to remain in their current professional settings while completing degrees (Hammond, 2016), and many professional degrees have been developed to allow healthcare providers (Manning & Pogorzelska-Maziarz, 2017; Thomas Jefferson University, 2018), social workers (Moore et al., 2015), teachers (Downing & Dyment, 2013), and religious leaders (ATS, 2013, 2018b) to earn their degrees completely online. Thus, online opportunities for learning about reflective practice have allowed instructors to cater to a variety of learning and teaching styles, broaden the pool of conversation partners for group
reflections, accommodate a wide range of practicum settings, and allow students to pursue
degrees wholly online.

As outlined in the above sections, technology-mediated reflection has moved from
asynchronous, written reflections shared with instructors to synchronous, multimedia reflections
shared with broader audiences blended with fully online experiences occurring in three-
dimensional, virtual spaces, such as Second Life. Journals submitted to instructors for feedback
have presented students with instructor perspectives that have augmented those encountered in
field site settings, while discussion boards, portfolios, blogs, and video recordings have allowed
for enhanced reflections accessible by peers and all those with access to the online platform
hosting the reflection. Videoconferences, chat, and social networking sites have advanced
reflections further to allow for synchronous communication and an even more diverse audience
for reflection, including service users, such as high school students located in time zones
different from preservice teachers. Simulations featuring avatars on platforms such as Second
Life and collaborative learning experiences hosted in wiki spaces also have provided online
experiences for reflection. Scenarios for reflection involving telepresence devices (Gleason &
Greenhow, 2017; Lieberman, 2018; Rudolph et al., 2017), which were discussed in the above
section covering online reflection, or augmented and virtual reality experiences perhaps may
represent the next generation of virtual field sites and reflective fora. For example, preservice
teachers who attended a hybrid residential course with online components reflected on their
experience creating augmented-reality resources for their students, including embedded links to
explanatory videos or images in documents featuring scientific vocabulary words and concepts
with Aurasma (Delello, 2014), and experiences involving immersive technologies such as
Oculus virtual reality headsets or HoloLens smart glasses have been recommended as an option
for creating clinical situations that allow for reflective debriefing with medical students (Cheng, Eppich, Sawyer, & Grant, 2017). Consequently, although the challenges of communicating online and utilizing ever-changing technologies have been formidable, the benefits of facilitating reflections with diverse audiences and incorporating unique placement settings seem to have motivated instructors and students to employ web-based technologies to help cultivate reflective practitioners for the next generation of helping professionals.

**Outcomes**

Not only have instructors employed a plethora of strategies to engage students in reflective practice, but they also have sought to develop a broad range of personal and professional qualities in students to enable them to better serve future clients. Personal qualities developed through reflection have included self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, and sociocultural awareness. Professional qualities have included aspects of professional identities comprising the ability to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice, articulate professional attributes tempered with personal values, and display the skills necessary for meaningful practice. Thus, the numerous outcomes achieved through reflection may help explain the importance placed on cultivating reflective practitioners across diverse fields, such as education, healthcare, social work, and religious leadership.

**Self-efficacy.** Students have developed confidence when reflecting on their beliefs and those of their placement supervisors in discussions with peers and instructors. For example, psychology students began to accept themselves as unique professionals, given the influence of their personal values and characteristics on their interactions with clients (Woodward, Keville, & Conlan, 2015), and a social work student, whose views on domestic violence conflicted with those of her placement supervisor, developed a sense of agency because her instructor affirmed
her beliefs’ validity (Pack, 2014). Peers also have facilitated a sense of efficacy by presenting alternative beliefs to those within their practicum community. For instance, Tan (2013) found that a preservice teacher whose field site mentor had wrapped her in a “bubble of incompetence” (p. 822) by repeatedly criticizing her time management skills was rejuvenated when her classmates explained that while she may need to develop pacing skills, she was, nonetheless, a capable teacher with three years of classroom experience. Although reflection can foster a renewed sense of confidence in personal and professional values, Priddis and Rogers (2017) noted that students should be encouraged to make “good enough” (p. 13) decisions in clinical situations to avoid undermining their sense of efficacy by incessantly reflecting and thereby becoming less certain of their ability to respond in accord with their espoused beliefs. Consequently, reflection, when tempered with the realization that all decisions will be somewhat imperfect and susceptible to revision, can help students increase their sense of agency by articulating the basis of their beliefs and, thus, preparing them to defend and use these beliefs to guide future actions.

Reflection also has helped students become more aware of their current abilities and the abilities of those whom they hope to serve. For example, a psychiatric nurse practitioner realized her ability to demonstrate compassion while completing a simulated interview (Schwindt & McNelis, 2015), preservice teachers became aware of their progress during their practicum experiences with abilities such as public speaking and time management through iterative or cumulative reflective journals (Khanam, 2015), and social work students discovered ways in which they were and were not effectively employing communication skills – such as turn taking, eye contact, and body language – while reflecting with peers and their instructor on video recordings of their performances in mock interviews (Bolger, 2014). Reflection on current
actions also has reinforced a sense of agency in students through comments delivered by an instructor on simulated teaching experience via a wireless headset that helped students improve their skills “on the spot” (Stahl et al., 2016, p. 9). Finally, reflection has allowed future helping professionals to discover the abilities of those whom they hope to serve, a process that has increased their confidence in working with such groups. For instance, occupational therapy students, through reflection on placement experiences, became aware of the abilities of those whom they hope to serve, including the sewing skills of women in abuse shelters, the responsiveness of people with Alzheimer’s disease to animals, and the elaborate ways in which underprivileged children hid their families’ poverty (Sanders, Van Oss, & McGeary, 2016). By realizing their future clients’ strengths, these occupational therapy students became more confident that they could help others overcome the challenges that they faced. Consequently, students have grown in confidence by reflecting on their own and others’ abilities that can help them impact service users and their communities positively.

Reflection also has improved students’ confidence by providing them with ideas for future situations. For example, preservice teachers increased their sense of agency by participating in simulated job interviews that were video recorded, then used as the basis for collaborative discussions with peers and their instructors (Chien, 2014). One student greatly appreciated the opportunity as she realized that she could present her weakness – nervousness – as a strength because it impelled her to plan her lessons carefully. Similarly, preservice teachers, who observed secondary teachers and noted ways in which they provided inclusive education through universal design (De Vroey & Petry, 2015), discovered techniques that they could employ in their classrooms that made them more confident in their ability to meet all students’ needs. Investigating problems that have arisen in current placement settings and preparing for
future situations also have fostered a sense of agency in students. For instance, Lutz, Roling, Berger, Edelhäuser, and Scheffer (2016) asked medical students to reflect with their instructors and peers on challenging situations, such as conversations with patients about terminal illness, and found that students emerged from these reflective discussions with a greater sense of self-efficacy because their classmates or instructors presented creative responses to professional dilemmas analyzed in these reflective discussions. Heinrich and Donham (2015) also used placement situations as fodder for reflection, but asked the preservice teachers participating in their study to reflect on practicum dilemmas by engaging with academic articles, a process that these preservice teachers found empowering, as it provided them with suggestions for their future classrooms concerning issues such as inclusion policies for physical education, as well as gender preferences for participation in vocal ensembles. Clearly, reflection for action, i.e., preparing for future events, has been used to foster a greater sense of confidence in students.

**Emotional intelligence.** Reflection has allowed students to become more aware of their own and others’ emotions. Through reflection, students can articulate their feelings and begin to analyze these emotions’ etiology or context. For example, a medical student voiced his anger and frustration with a peer who unexpectedly became ill, thereby causing him to miss a social event with friends, a process that helped him begin to understand his intensely negative reaction to a classmate contracting conjunctivitis (Vicini, Shaughnessy, & Duggan, 2017). Likewise, social work students became aware of clients’ influence on their emotional states, such as the excessive pessimism of one service user who caused a student to become “stuck” (Katz, Tufford, Bogo, & Regehr, 2014, p. 100) in talking about negative emotions, as well as the influence of their own anxiety on care provisions, such as neglecting to provide sufficient periods of silence to allow clients to speak when feeling anxious. Reflection not only has allowed future helping
professionals to become more cognizant of their own emotions, but also has facilitated their abilities in understanding others’ emotions. For instance, British social work students attended theatrical, but verbatim, renderings of mothers reporting their children’s sexual abuse and commented in their written reflections on the value of vicariously experiencing fictional clients’ emotions to help them respond in less bureaucratic manners to future service users (Leonard, Gupta, Stuart-Fisher, & Low, 2016). Similarly, preservice teachers reflecting on a field experience in an alternative school discussed their increased ability to empathize with “the personal and academic struggles” (Manburg, Moore, Griffin, & Seperson, 2017, p. 337) that many of these secondary students experienced while being educated primarily through digitally mediated instruction. Moreover, healthcare students have developed empathy through reflection on experiences, such as replicating tasks required of diabetic patients (Smith-Miller & Thompson, 2013), wearing a ostomy care simulator (Díaz, Maruca, Kuhnly, Jeffries, & Grabon, 2015), witnessing the sorrow of high-achieving parents receiving a diagnosis of Down syndrome for their newborn baby, and observing the sorrow of families in neonatal intensive care units (Cheng, LaDonna, Cristancho, & Ng, 2017). Clearly, reflective activities have enabled students to become more attuned to their own and others’ emotional states.

Reflection also has helped students develop suitable methods of coping with their emotions through reflective writing, discussions, or artwork and consequently reframing challenging experiences, as well as improving self-care practices. For instance, social work students, whose personal views contrasted with those of clients or employees in field placement contexts, benefitted from conversing with colleagues and supervisors about their emotions and possible methods of coping with these emotions (Marlowe et al., 2015). Similarly, medical students who completed a simulation appreciated debriefing with peers and instructors, as the
process allowed them to “blow off steam” (Fey, Scrandis, Daniels, & Haut, 2014, p. 253) and normalize their feelings of anxiety and failure within the simulated experience. Journaling and dialoguing about clinical experiences also have alleviated anxiety about clinical situations by allowing students to consider ways in which they can improve their professional skills and responses for future placement settings (Sun et al., 2016; Wanda et al., 2016). Not only have reflective conversations and journals enabled students to cope with their emotions, but the process of reframing situations and values through reflective artwork also has allowed future helping professionals to manage their affective states. For instance, occupational therapy students have developed the ability to challenge potentially destructive beliefs, such as perfectionism and pessimism, while reflecting through three-dimensional art on ethical challenges (Kinsella & Bidinosti, 2016). Moreover, preservice teachers have realized the destructive side of worrying by comparing themselves to characters portrayed in films (Harrison, 2017) and challenging unrealistic goals, such as rescuing, rather than assisting and advising, apathetic students in their classrooms (Hyatt, 2015). Finally, reflection has fostered improved self-care habits by allowing students to consider better ways to care for themselves and their personal lives. Specifically, social work students developed these skills by reflecting on how they consume food, which helped one student adjust her eating habits and, thus, avoid inadvertent weight gain (Wong, 2013). By caring for herself more effectively, this student also became more sensitive to the individual needs of clients, such as a woman for whom she procured a space heater to overcome substandard housing conditions. Additionally, preservice teachers (Meierdirk, 2017), as well as social work students (Pack, 2014), have realized the importance of separating their personal and professional lives to avoid tainting their home lives with problems from their placement settings. Similarly, social work students have become able
to regulate empathic concern for clients to avoid emotional exhaustion (Grant, 2014; Grant et al., 2014), and clergy have learned to refrain from incessantly judging themselves to care for themselves in accord with their espoused theological beliefs about a forgiving God (Doehring, 2013). While the above sections have discussed emotions as a separate outcome for reflection, Troyan and Kaplan (2015) noted that instructors who inordinately dichotomized personal reflection on emotions from academic reflection on theoretical and technical aspects of practice risked causing students to view reflection on emotions and personal issues as “word vomit” (Troyan & Kaplan, 2015, p. 387). Nonetheless, reflective assignments – when presented as holistic analyses of self, others, and society – have given students opportunities to consider appropriate coping mechanisms while considering the adverse emotional states that many students of the helping professions experience in practicum settings.

**Sociocultural awareness.** Just as reflection has allowed students to better understand emotions’ role in serving others, reflection, likewise, has enabled them to become more aware of the potential for cultural and socioeconomic settings to influence professional practice. For instance, reflection on experiences with those from other cultures has given students the opportunity to appreciate the strengths present in other cultures and their influence on professional settings. U.S. nursing students who completed field practicums in a Brazilian shantytown initially pitied and wanted to “rescue” (Schwind, Zanchetta, Aksenchuk, & Gorospe, 2013, p. 712) the impoverished people serving as their hosts, but later began to appreciate the positive influence of their happiness, generosity, and relationships on overall community well-being. Similarly, House and Parker (2015) investigated reflections written by ministry students and found that these students, who were engaging in short-term mission projects with pastors residing in diverse cultures, benefitted from observing the role of prayer in the lives of these
pastors and their congregations, in contrast to the rather-superficial engagement with prayer to which they had been exposed in their home culture of Australia. Occupational therapy students, who worked with traditionally marginalized groups, likewise began to recognize these individuals’ strengths, such as abused women’s sewing abilities, the responsiveness of those with Alzheimer’s disease to animals, and the exquisite ways in which children from low socioeconomic status families camouflaged their lack of financial resources for backpacks other than the inexpensive drawstring backpacks that they carried (Sanders et al., 2016). Additionally, Australian students reflecting on the process of developing solutions to challenges facing local communities while working collaboratively with university and community representatives were able to consider personal prejudices and behaviors that potentially contributed to these problems and the implications of such attitudes and actions on their future practice, especially when interacting with those from sociocultural settings conceptualized as the “other” (Smith, Shaw, & Tredinnick, 2015, p. 153). Nursing students, likewise, began to realize the limitations of their “idealized conceptions” (Billett, 2015a, p. 72) of nursing that contradicted their expectations of “being thanked for their good work” (Billett, 2015a, p. 72) when they encountered patients who “appeared less than grateful” (Billett, 2015a, p. 72). Finally, domestic social work students better appreciated social work’s limitations in a political context that expected “citizens to be increasingly less dependent upon the state” (Billett, 2015a, p. 146), and international students started to comprehend social work as an occupation, as their own countries lacked professional social workers (Billett, 2015a). Therefore, reflection on experiences in diverse sociocultural settings has created opportunities for students to understand the resources within these communities that may contrast with the sociocultural settings in which they have lived.
Reflection on intercultural experiences also has aided future helping professionals in realizing the possible role that sociocultural context may play in their workplaces. For example, future educational administrators, who reflected on their walk through a low socioeconomic status neighborhood (Martinez, 2015), realized how their relatively privileged backgrounds in middle class neighborhoods may differ from the communities in which their future schools are located, and Norwegian physiotherapy students serving outside Europe, in their reflective writings, discussed their difficulties in establishing relationships with patients who required interpreters and brought numerous family members to attend their therapy sessions (Horntvedt & Fougner, 2015). Moreover, future speech pathologists, who completed written reflections on their placements in schools serving children from linguistically diverse and low socioeconomic status families, explained that their experience helped them understand that students’ parents may not have time to devote to after-school activities with their children, such as speech exercises. Future social health practitioners working with Maori people also realized that their expectations of total abstinence from alcohol or similar substances might be inappropriate for those they were serving and that they should focus instead on helping clients achieve holistic well-being, as articulated by their patients (Shepherd & Newcombe, 2016). Furthermore, preservice teachers, who reflected on videos of their teaching, noticed that some English language learners seemed to find the lesson materials’ U.S. setting somewhat alien and hoped to connect future lessons to issues more relevant to the students’ communities (Ajayi, 2016). Preservice teachers, likewise, found reflecting on a study-abroad experience in China helpful in understanding the disorienting nature of ethnically diverse classrooms for Chinese residents who were mesmerized sufficiently by African Americans to ask for the opportunity to appear in photos with them (Craig, Zou, & Curtis, 2016). Thus, understanding other cultures’ role in
professional practice through reflection has sensitized helping professionals to sociocultural settings’ potential influence on their future practice.

Reflection, likewise, has given future helping professionals insights on their home cultures and personal assumptions’ potential influence on their interactions with others. For example, preservice teachers who reflected on prior experiences, such as immigrating to Australia or travelling to Japan, began to realize culture’s role in interpreting experiences and in developing pedagogical techniques (Moloney & Oguro, 2015). Additionally, preservice teachers, who reflected on assumptions about culturally and linguistically diverse students, noted changes in these assumptions, such as realizing that parents may not be able to attend open houses because they are working, as opposed to being unconcerned about their children’s education (Smith & Glenn, 2016). Preservice teachers, in an analogous study, altered their past assumptions about students attending juvenile justice schools after tutoring at such schools (Blevins, Moore, & Dexter-Torti, 2017), and education students who reflected on serving as tutors in alternative schools began to better understand the needs and interests of students attending high schools that differ from their own (Barnes, 2016). Similarly, reflection has allowed future social workers to articulate the media’s role in influencing their preconceptions of child abusers (Theobald et al., 2017) and preservice teachers to appreciate how traditional Finnish history curricula potentially may disadvantage Sami students (Acquah & Commins, 2015). Thus, allowing students to reflect on their beliefs about those from other cultures has enabled them to modify uncharitable and prejudicial assumptions about such groups.

**Professional identity.** Reflection has cultivated the values, knowledge, and actions associated with the various helping professions. Professional identity has been described using the dimensions of being, knowing, and doing (Allen, 1999; Cahalan, 2011, 2017; Dall’Alba,
dispositions or attributes (Billett, 2015b; Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation, 2013; Feiman-Nemser, 2008; LaBelle & Belknap, 2016); the characteristics of head, heart, and hands (Allen, 1999, 2004; Clarke, 2014, 2015), or episteme (theoretical knowledge); Aristotelian virtues (e.g., courage and justice); and techne (skill), as described by Kreber (2014, 2015) and Salloum (2017). Being a helping professional means embracing the relevant credentialing organization’s values, such as ethical practice within medicine (American Medical Association, 2001), caring within nursing (American Nurses Association, 2015), and a commitment to instruct all learners within teaching (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008).

Reflection has fostered the commitment to instruct all students by giving them the opportunity to consider inappropriate aspects of their prior educational experiences (Howells, Fitzallen, & Adams, 2016), or role play to instruct students with Asperger’s syndrome (Leaman & Flanagan, 2013). Similarly, nursing students, through reflection, have articulated their views on appropriate expressions of care and empathy with drawings or poetry (Jack, 2015; Schwind et al., 2015), and both nursing (Kidd et al., 2016) and medical students have represented ethical practice through the fine arts (Cox et al., 2016, p. 10). Therefore, reflection has helped students integrate professional standards into their visions of quality service to others.

While professional values lend unity, personal values allow helping professionals to temper this unity through individual emphases and interpretations of commonly held values. For example, preservice teachers have remarked on their commitment to help children be as happy as they were in family photos (Tur, Challinor, & Marín, 2016); their commitment to demonstrate care for self and others, as signified by a family cookbook (Walker, 2015); and their belief that all students should be treated with love because “everyone … reflects something of God that no
one else can” (Maaranen & Stenberg, 2017, p. 9). Similarly, social work students have expressed religious views that influence their future service, such as a desire to serve “the least of these” (Matthew 25:30, English Standard Version) marginalized individuals (Mulder & Dull, 2014), as well as views on providing positive social care to service users (Cavaliero, 2017) and dissatisfaction with placement settings that contradict their personal values to focus on clients’ needs, rather than organizational efficiency (Burr et al., 2016). Nursing students also have benefited from considering personal values by clarifying their spiritual beliefs about the afterlife prior to discussing these issues with patients (Briggs & Lovan, 2014) and helping them adhere to schedules and listen to patients (McAndrew & Roberts, 2015), as well as understand the relationship between diakonia (Acts 6), the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12), the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37), and compassionate care (Haugland, Lassen, & Giske, 2018). Additionally, medical students have articulated their commitment to emotionally distance themselves from patients to avoid inappropriate expressions of pity that could be construed as patronizing (Roper, Foster, Garlan, & Jorm, 2016); develop a view of themselves as interacting with patients, rather than rescuing them (Green, 2015); and transform parental projections of insecurity into a desire to foster psychological health in others (Allen, 2000). However, reflections on personal views of appropriate practice have revealed problematic values, such as an overreliance on advice from supervisors (Ryan & Carmichael, 2016), a “preoccupation” (Lengelle et al., 2016, p. 62) that has misguided choice of occupation, ignorance of others’ role in providing educational services (Beltman, Glass, Dinham, Chalk, & Nguyen, 2015), and negative attitudes toward those with mental health problems (Ross, Mahal, Chinnapen, Kolar, & Woodman, 2014). Despite these limitations in reflection on individual notions of quality service,
reflection has equipped students to serve others in a manner that aligns with their worldviews yet respects the professional standards to which they are obligated.

Similarly, reflection has helped students interweave theory and practice. For example, preservice teachers used forum theater to role play challenging situations, such as responding to disruptive students throwing wet paper or communicating with parents concerning potential child abuse, and successfully integrated course materials and theoretical constructs in their responses to these situations (Eriksen, Larsen, & Leming, 2015). Additionally, early education students appreciated narratives shared by their peers that illustrated the “abstract concepts” (Flanagan, 2015, p. 164) covered in course lectures, and teaching interns effectively linked theories concerning multiple intelligences and affective filters to videos of their classroom teaching when composing reflective essays on these videos (Ajayi, 2016). Moreover, reflection has helped students realize the importance of applying principles such as Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development, even though doing so may cause temporary discomfort among their students (Gelfuso, 2016) and, likewise, supplied them with the confidence to teach in a way that differs from that of their placement teacher because they have been able to articulate their instruction’s theoretical basis (Jones & Charteris, 2017). Therefore, reflection has allowed students to connect theoretical knowledge to practice situations and, thus, the relationship between their academic studies and future service to others.

However, teaching students to integrate theory with practice can be challenging to facilitate. For instance, Ajayi (2016) commented that students had difficulty explaining the theories that they used while teaching others, and Wong (2016a) noted that students sometimes perceived reflection as a “technical … [or] mechanical” (p. 5) method required for documenting field site experiences, rather than a meaningful professional practice designed to ground ministry
in concepts discussed in their seminary courses. Additionally, social work students tended to rely on personal experience, such as having a grandmother with arthritis, or prior volunteer work on a distress line, rather than theoretical knowledge when completing simulated intake interviews (Katz et al., 2014), and instructors limited their feedback on preservice teachers’ discussion posts to psychosocial support, rather than illustrations of the “theory-practice nexus” (Jones & Ryan, 2014, p. 133). Furthermore, the format for reflection has influenced the extent to which students have discussed theoretical concepts. For example, preservice teachers have included references to theory more often in reflective writings than in spoken reflective comments (Allas, Leijen, & Toom, 2017).

Likewise, preservice teachers, who attended thematic practicums structured around specific pedagogical principles, more frequently referred to educational theories in their reflective assignments than students participating in a less-structured reflective practicum (Stenberg, Rajala, & Hilppo, 2016). Moreover, Baker (2014) found that modelling the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice for education students helped them understand the concept of an authentically reflective practitioner who routinely draws on scholarly works to hone her professional skills. Finally, Knutsson et al. (2015) investigated reflective seminars’ impact on nursing students and noted that collective dialogue helped their students better understand the principles of caring to which they had been exposed in course readings because the instructors deliberately emphasized these principles within group discussions. Clearly, instructors successfully have overcome the challenges of interweaving theory and practice by carefully structuring classes so that students have opportunities to see the process of anchoring practice in theory.
Moreover, reflection has enabled future helping professionals to become more aware of their own and others’ behaviors so that they can better adjust their practice to their knowledge of and beliefs about service to others. For example, ministry students, who reflected on their field placements on discussion boards (Hatcher, 2013), recorded ways in which they were developing their ability to engage in personal spiritual practices, perform liturgical ceremonies, interpret sacred and theological texts, and appropriately contextualize their ministry to meet local congregations’ needs, all of which are skills that competent clergy need (Foster, Dahill, Golemon, & Tolentino, 2005). Additionally, social work students, who reflected on video recordings of mock interviews with clients, realized ways in which they could improve body language, eye contact, and guiding comments in future interviews with service users (Bolger, 2014). Additionally, nursing students, who reflected on video recordings of simulated clinical experiences, were better able to concentrate on their instructors’ feedback while viewing these videos than during real-time simulations in which they were distracted emotionally through nervousness (Najjar, Lyman, & Miehl, 2015). Likewise, preservice music teachers, who reflected on filmed lessons, noticed details of which they were previously unaware, such as the need to increase their volume when addressing students (Powell, 2016), and preservice teachers who role-played conferences with parents on virtual reality platforms realized their tendency to overcompensate for perceived deficiencies, as reported by frustrated avatar parents (Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015). Finally, preservice teachers, who maintained reflective journals, became cognizant of their development as teachers (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018), as well as lesson planning and voice projection’s impact in the classroom (Khanam, 2015). Thus, reflection has provided future helping professionals with a venue for considering their behaviors in practice settings to better align these behaviors with their knowledge and beliefs.
Reflection also has allowed future helping professionals to analyze others’ behaviors and describe these behaviors’ potential influences on their preferred manner of providing service. For instance, preservice foreign language teachers completed reflective blogs in which they discussed prior educational experiences that affected their views on teaching, such as one teacher who noted that he had been corrected too frequently by an overly critical instructor and consequently hoped to provide comments to his students, who were encouraging, rather than debilitating (Fisher & Kim, 2013). Moreover, Turkish preservice teachers placed in rural, one-room, or multiple-grade schools hoped to avoid behaviors such as disregarding curriculum guidelines and blaming classroom problems on systemic issues concerning facilities and resources (Seban, 2015). Similarly, medical students who created reflective portfolios based on practicum experiences described behaviors they had witnessed and how they hoped to avoid gossiping about patients, being rude to other nursing staff, and ignoring patients’ visible signs of discomfort (Wong & Trollope-Kumar, 2014). However, these students also noted that they found positive role models during their field placements whom they hoped to emulate, including one surgeon who respected his patient’s right to decline surgery. Therefore, reflection has helped students crystallize moments from field placements and prior experiences to describe the types of helping professionals that they want to become in the future.

Challenges

Although reflection has helped students integrate professional knowledge and beliefs into practice, numerous challenges have been encountered by instructors seeking to engage students in reflection due to individual and cultural differences, as well as student concerns about being judged by peers, instructors, and those who have access to online reflections. Individual students with more workplace and life experience, as well as those in advanced stages of their degree
programs, have shown greater facility with higher reflection levels involving analysis of assumptions and organizational structures. Moreover, students from non-Western cultures have experienced difficulties with reflection due to deeply held beliefs about appropriate social norms, including an emphasis on social harmony, consideration of their own and others’ reputations, and respect for authority figures. Therefore, many studies have presented the complex ways in which students’ unique sociocultural ecologies have impacted their reflections’ content and style.

**Individual differences.** Personal preferences and general life experiences have been shown to impact reflection quality and highlight the challenge for instructors who teach a diverse group of students. For instance, teachers with three or more years of classroom experience found written reflective journals more useful than teachers with less professional experience (Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018), and Wong (2009) noticed that ministry students ages 25 to 40 completed deeper reflections than those with only 19 to 24 years of life experience. Additionally, personal preferences and tendencies have been shown to affect how students reflect. For example, preservice teachers have chosen to engage in writing discussion board posts, rather than speaking in reflective discussions (Enochsson, 2018; Farr & Riordan, 2015), and students across the health and social care professions spectrum focused more on themselves in their semiprivate written reflections than in collaborative discussions (Aiguier, Oboeuf, Cobbaut, & Vanpee, 2015). Finally, some students have expressed negative views on reflection in action based on a belief that changing a lesson plan may deter from their professional ability to prepare and deliver a lesson (Griffith, 2017). Consequently, personal preferences, life experiences, and reflective media have impacted how students engage in reflection.

Moreover, students have exhibited higher levels of reflection as they advance through their degree programs. For example, students pursuing degrees in the health sciences relied less
on descriptions of experiences as they moved from the first to the fourth year of their training program (Ruiz-López et al., 2015). Likewise, speech pathology students completing a placement experience in culturally diverse settings developed an appreciation for reflection as they moved from the first to the second year of the program because they developed a “conscious incompetence” (Howells, Barton, & Westerveld, 2016, p. 267) of how they were and were not aware of their patients and their families’ cultural settings. Finally, returning to the same experience or reflection on an experience has proven beneficial to students in the helping professions. Moen and Brown (2017) provided healthcare leadership students with opportunities to create patchwork reflections on action research projects that later were combined into unified reflective essays, and Khanam (2015) asked students to reflect before and after practicum experiences on their beliefs about teaching to unearth any changes in these beliefs. Such research studies reinforce Moon’s (2010) observation that perspectives change with alterations in time, as well as Cowan and Stroud’s (2016) recommendation that students “compost” (p. 27), or reconsider, prior reflections and highlight time and experience’s role in crafting significant reflections.

**Cultural differences.** Not only do individual variations in experiences and preferences impact reflections, but so do cultural differences, such as the high regard placed on social harmony and status demonstrated by students from non-Western, collectivist cultures. For example, Indonesian preservice teachers purposefully avoided creating conflict by providing exclusively positive feedback for their peers’ sample lessons during discussions, and Chinese students have had trouble negatively evaluating their peers’ comments in group conversations (Wen et al., 2015). Moreover, Chinese preservice teachers expressed reluctance to criticize their peers’ teaching practices because they did not want to embarrass their fellow students (Zhan &
Wan, 2016), and instructors for Chinese nursing students recommended providing students with early access to course materials so that students could formulate their comments for discussion groups carefully and, thus, avoid losing others’ esteem (2013). Additionally, Arab Emirati students have tended to shun reflection on sociopolitical issues that may entail negatively evaluating others who support current social and political norms (Moussa-Inaty, 2015). Clearly, the inhibition to critique peers or professors meaningfully sometimes can create oppressively polite classroom cultures that limit students’ ability to engage in deep reflection on potentially problematic aspects of their professional practices.

Additionally, many students from non-Western cultures prefer to rely on their instructors for advice and guidance because they represent traditional authority figures. For instance, Chinese students had difficulty meaningfully contributing to reflective discussions comprised solely of their peers because they placed a greater value on their supervising teachers’ opinions, (Zhan & Wan, 2016). These preservice teachers were accustomed to allowing their mentor teachers to choose the most appropriate pedagogical techniques for their classrooms and, therefore, felt uncomfortable evaluating the teaching suggestions that their peers presented. Similarly, students from Hong Kong expressed hesitation in voicing their own views or asking questions during class due to the “deification” (Joyce-McCoach, Parrish, Andersen, & Wall, 2013, p. 390) of teachers in Chinese culture, and Chinese teachers seeking additional qualifications, in contrast to Western students enrolled in the same program, often focused on negative events in written reflective journals, a tendency that the researcher attributed to their regard for themselves as “apprentices to the master teacher continually seek[ing] perfection” (Murphy, 2015, p. 119). Preservice teachers from the United Arab Emirates similarly have reported difficulties in analyzing the information provided to them in courses as their educational
experiences in primary and secondary schools, as well as within their families, largely were authoritarian (Hourani, 2013), and Kuswandono (2014) reported that Indonesian preservice teachers valued the instructor’s comments over those of their peers. Additionally, cultural norms in conjunction with competencies listed by professional accrediting organizations seemed to influence Chinese social work students who expressed a desire to learn skills through directive coaching from mentors, rather than acquiring reflective abilities (Cheung, 2015). Malaysian medical imaging students not only disliked discussing personal opinions, which seemed to contradict the cultural norm of following rules established by authorities, but also disliked discussing emotions that they had been taught to suppress throughout their childhood and that they felt could make a bad impression on their instructors (Fernandez, Chelliah, & Halim, 2015). Nonetheless, Baker (2014) successfully instructed students from the UAE in reflective practice by carefully modelling reflection on learning through play with preservice teachers steeped in Islamic values, and nuances within seemingly monolithic cultures sometimes are overlooked (Mallaby & Tan, 2018). While reflection can occur in non-Western cultures, prior research has demonstrated that the topic must be introduced in such a way as to respect cultural norms regarding social hierarchies, as well as the emphasis placed on conflict avoidance in many non-Western societies.

Role of Audience

The audience for reflective assignments has included instructors and peers, as well as supervisors, potential employers, and all those with access to online platforms that archive students’ reflections. These audience members have influenced student reflections, e.g., instructors’ comments have allowed them to remain engaged in coursework and receive alternative perspectives to those of their peers, but also have caused them to refrain from
discussing meaningful personal events, fearing negative evaluations by their instructors, or to fulfill grading criteria for which they crafted fictional events. Similarly, peers have helped students receive psychosocial support and become familiar with diverse perspectives on professional practice, but sometimes have been perceived as unsuitable audience members because of their seeming inability to supply helpful feedback, as well as stifle sincere comments due to fear that reflective comments could be misunderstood or misused. Moreover, potential employers, field placement supervisors, and all those with access to online platforms have limited the authenticity of students’ reflections. Although audience members can influence reflections adversely, instructors have found strategies – such as limiting access to reflective assignments, creating psychologically safe spaces for reflection, and grading reflections in nontraditional manners – to diminish artificiality in students’ reflections.

**Instructors as audience.** Students have benefitted from having their instructors as an audience by becoming more engaged in their coursework and by receiving alternative perspectives beyond those of their peers. For example, Ruiz-López et al. (2015) found that physiotherapy students became unmotivated and submitted meaningless reflections on clinical experiences if they perceived that their instructors were neglecting to read their reflective journals. As one student explained, “When you don’t feel valued, when they don’t respond, you think: ‘Bah! I can put whatever I want’” (Ruiz-López et al., 2015, p. 4). Medical students also have become disenchanted with reflective assignments when instructors have failed to provide meaningful comments (e.g., comments focusing on medical, rather than grammatical, issues) in a timely fashion and resented the seeming waste of their time during clinical experiences (Arntfield, Parlett, Meston, Apramian, & Lingard, 2016). Instructors not only have helped students remain motivated through feedback, but also have supplied students with additional
views on their reflective comments through insightful questions about their critical reflections on social work field placements (Testa & Egan, 2015), including remarks that challenged their reflections on clinical placements, thereby diverging from their peers’ relatively supportive responses (Wen et al., 2015) or their supervising teachers’ approval of discipline strategies (Liu, 2017). Jones and Ryan (2014) criticized instructors who failed to provide views that contrasted with peers’ socioemotional responses and noted the importance of providing feedback that integrated theoretical principles. Consequently, instructors who purposefully have modeled reflection that incorporates diverse perspectives, including those of relevant theorists, have allowed students to situate their reflections in a broader context and, likewise, helped them remain engaged with their university assignments.

However, requiring students to submit reflections to their professors has proven problematic, as students inadvertently have reduced reflection to a fossilized product, rather than an ongoing process. Leigh (2016) noted that reflective assignments pose the risk of being reduced to exercises in proving competence, rather than learning to reflect “corporeal presence and awareness into a practice … to facilitate the opportunity for an understanding of and improvement to that practice” (p. 81), and reflection research supports this conclusion. For example, Roberts (2016) noted that one student regarded reflection as paperwork rather than an authentic expression of reflection on practice by explaining that the reflection “was an assignment at the end of the day…. It wasn’t necessarily about what I was thinking” (p. 31). Likewise, Bruster and Peterson (2013) demonstrated that written journals for instructors were completed in a formal tone seeming to deter dialogue, whereas blogs were written in an informal tone and sought advice on challenging instructional situations. Therefore, requiring students to present their reflections sometimes has caused them to view reflection as an isolated artifact
required for courses, rather than an ongoing dialogue with colleagues on professional experiences.

Moreover, students repeatedly have raised concerns about being negatively evaluated by their instructors. For instance, students have explained that they do not feel comfortable discussing personal (Marsh, 2014; Testa & Egan, 2015) or professional difficulties (Hourani, 2013; Ruiz-López et al., 2015) because they fear that their instructors may perceive them unfavorably or as “maverick … [and] dangerous” (Curtis, Gorolay, Curtis, & Harris, 2016, p. 621). Given the importance of unsettling or problematic events in reflection (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Mezirow, 1990, 1991), such self-censorship may reduce reflective assignments to somewhat-superficial exercises, rather than a precursor to lifelong reflection on practice. This potential to view reflection as paperwork, rather than consideration of truly significant experiences, becomes especially problematic when students cannot view their instructors’ nonverbal reactions to their assignments in the online environment (Ross, 2014a), and when professors may serve as future supervisors (Arntfield et al., 2016) or as panelists for job interviews (Binks et al., 2013).

Instructors also have voiced their discomfort while reading reflections that discuss personal or professional issues that seem to require psychological interventions such as discussions of self-harm or depression (Oehlerls & Shorthand-Jones, 2016), and Marsh (2014) specifically criticized the practice of requiring reflections that integrate the first person. Thus, instructors’ unease with psychologically upsetting topics, as well as the pervasive fear of instructors displayed by students, has restricted topics discussed by students within reflective coursework significantly.

Instructors who have evaluated reflections also unintentionally may have caused students to conform to perceived or explicit expectations for reflections, instead of creating authentic reflections on their views and experiences. For instance, nursing students participating in
reflective discussions have felt pressured to conform to implicit norms, such as sharing dramatic episodes from clinical rounds concerning deeply emotional topics regarding “death or suicide ... [which] evoke tears” (Knutsson et al., 2015, p. 9) during group discussions or passively accepting recommendations during conversations with an “aggressively helpful” (Yagata, 2017, p. 8) instructor, even if these suggestions did not address their more fundamental difficulties, such as frustration and exhaustion. Moreover, students often have submitted reflections that conform to their instructors’ explicit expectations articulated in feedback or grading criteria. Ross (2014a) found that one student who received comments from her instructor critiquing her negative views on reflection subsequently drafted reflections that portrayed “a false vision of herself” (p. 227) and development when she felt that she had not grown during the experience. Similarly, students have conformed to the grading criteria by “regurgitating what they [the tutors] wanted to hear” (Roberts, 2016, p. 31) and by fabricating events on which to reflect to meet assignment requirements (Maloney, Tai, Lo, Molloy, & Ilic, 2013). Therefore, students’ propensity to comply with instructor requirements calls reflections’ authenticity into question, as well as reflective assignments’ impact on professional practice.

**Peers as audience.** Just as instructors have both helped and hindered students by reviewing their reflective assignments, so have other students both cultivated and stymied the development of reflective practitioners. Students’ peers have been able to provide emotional support by encouraging their classmates, normalizing challenging practicum experiences, and allowing one another to engage in catharsis through reflective discussions. They also have been able to provide alternative perspectives on situations or ideas and to supply new techniques to try in future professional encounters. However, peers also have stifled reflective dialogue because their comments have been perceived as stemming from a knowledge base inferior to that of their
instructors, or simply as unhelpful. Moreover, many have voiced fears that other students might misunderstand their reflections, thereby causing these students to judge them unfavorably. Finally, students have resisted sharing deeply significant issues, as they fear that their peers may misuse their stories and, thus, impact their future or current employment prospects. Peers’ complex role as audience members for reflective assignments adds a further dimension to the already-complex nature of educating future helping professionals.

Peers have impacted the reflective process positively by supplying emotional support in the form of reassuring remarks by creating outlets for negative experiences and feelings, as well as normalizing upsetting field placement or simulation circumstances. For instance, preservice teachers have provided affirmations of their fellow students’ competence with somewhat-generic comments on perceived failures in reflective blog postings, such as, “I think you will do great as long as you keep planning and practicing…. You can do it!” (Garza & Smith, 2015, p. 8), and Thai medical students seemingly have been able to resolve complex issues, such as the death of a patient, through written reflections blended with collaborative dialogues (Sukhato et al., 2016). Likewise, nursing students appreciated debriefing with their peers following medical simulations because they felt free to “blow off steam” (Fey et al., 2014) during these reflective discussions. Additionally, peers have helped normalize feelings of frustration during placement experiences as preservice physical education teachers (Lamb, Lane, & Aldous, 2013), as well as feelings of stress during simulations of caring for acutely ill adult patients (Fey et al., 2014) and when completing placement requirements as dental students (Quick, 2016a). Therefore, peers have formed spaces in which their classmates can receive encouragement, release their emotions, and realize that their difficulties resemble those of other students in their degree programs.
Peers not only have provided psychosocial comfort, but also have exposed their classmates to alternative perspectives and ideas not otherwise present within the curriculum. For example, nursing students, through reflection with fellow students, have been better able to understand dichotomous thinking patterns (Knutsson et al., 2015) and have discovered systemic problems that transcend those of the individual patient (Wheeler, Butell, Epeneter, Langford, & Taylor, 2016). Additionally, medical students have discussed clinical issues viewed as trivial by a teaching assistant due to their classmates’ persistence in guiding a group conversation (Veen & de la Croix, 2016), and a preservice teacher realized that she was not as familiar with younger generations as she assumed while discussing roll call through animal sounds, a practice that she observed in her field placement setting (Tan, 2013). Moreover, medical students valued the creative solutions developed by their peers during group discussions on clinical communication dilemmas (Lutz et al., 2016), and preservice teachers benefitted from strategies discussed by other students within blog postings (van Wyk, 2013) and group discussions that focused on narratives from practicum settings (Flanagan, 2015), as well as savvy job interview techniques, such as portraying weaknesses as strengths during peer reviews of video-recorded mock job interviews (Chien, 2014). Thus, the experiences and views of students’ peers have enriched the reflective process for other students by giving them access to a wider variety of techniques and perspectives than those contained within the course materials and placement settings.

Although peers have supplied emotional support and additional perspectives on professional practice, students have not always valued their peers’ feedback and sometimes have feared that their peers will misunderstand or misuse their reflections. For instance, students may view their classmates as insufficiently informed to provide solutions to challenging placement experiences (Dalgarno et al., 2015; Lamb et al., 2013) and view their remarks as irrelevant.
(Flanagan, 2015), overly critical (Fey et al., 2014), or directed exclusively to those already within their social networks (Dalgarno et al., 2015). Researchers also have noticed that other students may not voice nonnormative perspectives due to fears of ostracization (Punzi, 2015), may be more critical of themselves than their classmates (Quick, 2016b), and may not challenge peers’ beliefs or behaviors (Garza & Smith, 2015). Finally, students have expressed concerns that their peers may misunderstand their reflections (Watts, 2015), negatively evaluate their comments (Testa & Egan, 2015), or share their reflections with others who will judge them less than favorably (Knutsson et al., 2015; Lutz et al., 2016; Testa & Egan, 2015). As one teacher education student explained, “I … don’t like to divulge too much because I think it’s a small world, and things travel round” (Flanagan, 2015, p. 161). Clearly, not all students have been comfortable discussing upsetting or potentially sensitive situations with their peers, fearing judgmental responses or indiscreet promulgation of potentially damaging information, as well as perceiving their peers as unable or unwilling to provide insightful remarks on their reflections.

**Miscellaneous audience members.** Additional audience members for students’ reflections have included potential employers, field placement supervisors, and anyone with access to online archives for reflections. These audience members have caused future professionals to restrict their comments to avoid negatively influencing their future employment prospects and have presented them with contrasting, and sometimes confusing, views on reflective practice. For instance, medical students (Brown et al., 2013), as well as future school counselors (Wakimoto & Lewis, 2014), viewed their reflective portfolios as platforms on which to demonstrate their competence and impress prospective employers, rather than avenues for considering problematic events from which they could learn through reflection. Similarly, student nurses (Dahl & Eriksen, 2016) and future social workers (Testa & Egan, 2015) feared
criticizing their placement settings in reflective discussion groups because placement supervisors were members of these reflective conversations and potentially could retaliate against students whom they perceived as negatively evaluating their field sites. Moreover, contrasting views on reflection’s purpose within the field site confused future social workers, who were trained to engage in critical reflection by their university instructors, but were required to complete formulaic reflections designed to meet accountability standards by their placement supervisors (Wilson, 2013) and, thus, experienced parallel universes of reflective practice within the two educational settings. Although contrasting views have been confusing, they also have facilitated understanding and dialogue between students and those whom they have served during their social work practicum (Skoura-Kirk et al., 2013). Finally, medical students in the United Kingdom, who were required to complete reflective portfolios for certification requirements, feared impacting their future employment prospects by posting sensitive information in their reflective portfolios, which were housed on a government server due to concerns about potential security breaches within this platform that might allow unauthorized users to view the clinical experiences on which they were reflecting (Brown et al., 2013). Therefore, the plethora of potential and actual audience members for reflective assignments has caused many students to restrict their reflections to issues that can portray them in a positive light and sometimes has confused their understanding of reflective writing’s purpose.

**Enhancing the role of the audience.** Although advantages, as well as disadvantages, have been associated with shared reflections, instructors have employed techniques, such as creating psychologically safe spaces in which students can reflect, and have used a variety of procedures for grading students’ reflections. Professors have created psychologically safe spaces for reflection by interacting with students, acknowledging that mistakes should be expected
while developing as a helping professional, and showing respect for students’ contributions to reflective conversations. Professors similarly have employed a variety of strategies for evaluating students’ reflections, ranging from allowing only the instructor to review certain reflective assignments, allowing peers to evaluate themselves and their classmates, and refraining from grading reflective journals or discussions. Therefore, the audience of peers, instructors, placement supervisors, and those with access to online reflections has impacted reflections, but this audience can be enhanced to avoid stifling meaningful reflections on practice by cultivating an atmosphere of psychological safety, as well as using diverse grading procedures.

Psychologically safe environments for reflection have been developed through sustained interaction between instructors and students, acceptance of mistakes, and a demonstration of respect for students’ thoughts and ideas. In residential courses involving reflection, instructors have interviewed individual students and explained the purpose of reflective journals (Ruiz-López et al., 2015) or remained with the same group of students over sequential years of their clinical placements (Powers, Vance, & Fleming, 2016). In online courses, professors have received more honest reflections simply by supplying biweekly feedback on reflective journals (Pack, 2014), as recommended by standards for online general (Quality Matters, 2014a, 2014b) and specifically theological (Baltrip, 2015) education. Instructors, likewise, have constructed safe learning atmospheres by explaining to students that mistakes are to be expected (Fey et al., 2014) or by discussing their consumerist tendencies in a class requiring students to do the same (Corrie, 2013). Finally, sheltered spaces for reflection have been developed by honoring and welcoming students’ comments through purposefully bidirectional conversations in which both instructors and students participate (Gaete & Strong, 2017; Rankine & Thompson, 2015), rather than more authoritarian forms of supervision or instruction involving unidirectional monologues.
(Yagata, 2017). Thus, prior research has demonstrated that significant reflections have been fostered through classrooms that make students sufficiently comfortable to share their ideas and express their perceived shortcomings while routinely interacting with their instructors.

Faculty not only have enhanced the audience’s role by forming psychologically safe environments for reflection, but also have restricted people who have access to students’ reflections and have employed a variety of grading procedures. Professors have limited access to written reflections to balance shared reflective discussions’ impact and facilitate the expression of views that students may not feel comfortable sharing with their classmates (Martinez, 2015; Powers et al., 2016), and Ross (2014b) recommended shredding (i.e., virtually decomposing) online reflections into metatags after assessment to avoid unauthorized access. Instructors, likewise, have allowed students to keep some aspects of their reflective journals confidential by requesting that they submit only portions of their reflective journals for grading (Gerhardt, 2013), or as comments in group discussions (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). Peacock and Cowan (2017) encouraged such private or intra-mental spaces for reflection as a foil for the pervasive online discussion boards shared with peers and professors by comparing them to retreats in which issues could be analyzed and synthesized into meaningful ideas that later could be shared with others in collaborative spaces. Moreover, instructors have utilized nontraditional assessment strategies to facilitate authentic reflections, including self and peer evaluation combined with formative feedback from the instructor (Nelson, Miller, & Yun, 2016), and have ungraded reflective discussions (Fey et al., 2014) or journals (Wong, 2013) submitted to the instructor. By adjusting the range of audience members for students’ reflections, professors have allowed their students to benefit from others’ input while simultaneously protecting their privacy on issues that they prefer not to reveal to other members of the learning community.
Thus, instructors, peers, and sundry others have influenced reflective assignments’ tenor and quality, but these influences have been enhanced and mitigated through careful consideration of the number and types of reflections that others can view, as well as utilization of manifold grading procedures for student reflections. By serving as audience members, instructors have been able to help students remain engaged in their coursework and expose them to alternative perspectives, but simultaneously have risked reducing reflection to the creation of fossilized artifacts, rather than an integral aspect of professional practice, by stifling some reflective remarks due to students’ fears of being judged by their instructors and their tendency to conform to explicit or implicit grading criteria, as well as demonstrating reluctance to create assignments involving psychosocial issues that may require referral for counseling or similar interventions. Peers also have influenced their classmates’ reflections by supplying alternative perspectives and providing opportunities to receive and provide emotional support for unsettling placement experiences. At the same time, some students have restricted their reflections because they fear that other students will reply with uninformed or unhelpful advice, misunderstand their comments, or indiscreetly share their comments with potential colleagues or employers. Miscellaneous audience members – such as future employers, field site supervisors, and those with access to online platforms housing reflective assignments – have impacted students’ reflections, as students have feared being perceived negatively by these groups and sometimes have been confused by the rather formulaic use of reflections in placement settings. Although instructors and peers’ influence on reflective assignments has been alleviated by reducing access to student reflections and using nontraditional grading methods, this influence has represented an enduring concern within the literature on instructing future helping professionals on how to engage in reflective practice.
**Topics previously investigated in the empirical literature.** As discussed in the above sections, prior research has examined methods for instructing students in reflective practice, including stepwise procedures for reflection, such as Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle, multimedia platforms (e.g., e-portfolios and videos), the fine and performing arts, and discussion groups. Additionally, previous studies have discussed how reflection has occurred online through journals, e-portfolios, discussion boards, blogs, shared videos, web conferencing platforms, chat sessions, social media, simulations, and wikis. Although these online reflection forms have widened audiences for students’ reflections, expanded experiences on which students can reflect, and allowed instructors to accommodate diverse learning styles, they also have presented unique challenges relating to technology, communication between geographically separated individuals, authenticity, and privacy. Moreover, previous studies have investigated numerous outcomes associated with reflective activities – such as self-efficacy, emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, and the cultivation of professional identities – and this multitude of outcomes may be related to the lack of a clear definition of and theoretical framework for reflection that may place reflection at risk of becoming a shibboleth that instructors mention due to professional accreditation standards, but do not fully explain to their students. Furthermore, prior research has highlighted the challenges of teaching reflection, such as individual and cultural differences that may affect reflection quality and content, as well as the impact of audience members, who can cause students to create artificial reflections designed to avoid being negatively evaluated by instructors, peers, and others with access to their coursework. Therefore, current literature has overviewed reflective assignments that have been completed in a variety of formats to achieve a broad range of outcomes, but have been attended by an equally diverse group of challenges, such as the concept of reflection, the influence of individual and cultural differences on reflections,
and concerns over potentially negative evaluations by those who review reflective coursework, as well as difficulties with digital platforms for shared online reflections.

**Gaps in the literature.** The current literature on reflective practice has presented several significant issues that should be addressed by future research. First, the literature has not yet established a clear definition for *reflection*, which may have caused researchers, practitioners, students, and instructors to find the topic somewhat confusing. Compounding this lack of a clear definition is the overreliance on perspectives from the healthcare and education fields that dominate the existing empirical research, and within research on distance instruction in reflection assisted by online technologies, a lack of research exists on the perspectives of instructors teaching in the wholly online environment. Thus, research investigating faculty voices from the helping professions of social care and religious leadership, who teach in the online learning environment, may help clarify reflective and non-reflective practice’s overall boundaries, as well as identify effective means of instructing others in the art of truly reflective practice.

**Lack of a clear definition of reflection.** A persistent literature gap is the lack of agreement among scholars concerning the definition of *reflection* (Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016). Although Harrison (2017) argued that the existing plurality of definitions can be viewed as a strength, general guidelines on processes that do and do not represent reflection would help researchers and practitioners interested in reflective practice present the concept to others more effectively. Therefore, future researchers may want to investigate how instructors and students define reflection. Furthermore, future researchers may want to analyze reflection not only through the theories of Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), but also through the transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1990, 1991) or the extensive works on reflection by van Manen (1977, 2015) that discuss reflection levels, as well as reflection in action. Collin et al. (2013)
argued that reflective practice should be examined through theoretical vantage points other than Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), as an overreliance on these seminal authors may have contributed to the current confusion about the concept of reflective practice. By incorporating transformative learning theory and specifically inquiring about the definition of reflection, future researchers can address this gap in the current literature.

**Helping professions outside of education and healthcare.** Additionally, very little research has been performed on students or instructors outside the helping professions of healthcare and education. For instance, only a few studies have been conducted on students training for the clergy, including investigations of online graduate students shared through journals (Doehring, 2013) and discussion boards (Hatcher, 2013), reflections on transcripts of chat sessions in which students role-played pastoral counseling sessions (McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014), and overall perceptions of learning how to be reflective, as articulated by residential undergraduate students (Wong, 2016a). Given the importance of reflection for the continuing development of ministers (Francis, 2018; Nash, 2014; O’Brien, 2016), research on the instruction of future ministers – who are not required, as are other helping professionals, to engage in routine professional education to maintain their credentials – seems essential in preparing future clergy to develop their ministry practice continually through reflection. The recent research on instruction in reflective practice for social work students seems scant and limited to studies on reflective journals (e.g., Grant, 2014; Grant et al., 2014), but exceeds that for clergy in courses facilitated by online technologies, such as shared journals (Jensen-Hart et al., 2014), discussion boards (Smit & Tremethick, 2017; Testa & Egan, 2015), videos (Bowers & Pack, 2017; Fitch et al., 2016; Pack, 2016), social media (Ranz & Nuttman-Shwartz, 2017), and simulations (Dodds, Heslop, & Meredith, 2018; Reinsmith-Jones et al., 2015). Nonetheless, both
social work and theological education lack the strong empirical foundations of their counterparts in the helping professions of education and healthcare. The underrepresentation of research on institutions of Christian higher education in the current literature (Smith, Um, & Beversluis, 2014) further aggravates the small number of studies concerning instruction in reflective practice for those preparing to shape future generations’ souls. This lack of research concerning the instruction of reflective practice consequently limits the abilities of instructors in these fields to adequately prepare future social workers and pastors attending Christian colleges and universities for any potentially challenging contexts in which they may serve.

However, the education and healthcare disciplines are well-represented in the current literature, as signified by numerous extant literature reviews concerning the teaching of reflective practice in education and healthcare. General reviews of reflective practice in teacher education include those of Belvis, Pineda, Armengol, and Moreno (2013), who analyzed the evaluation of reflection within teacher education programs; Collin et al. (2013), who critiqued the current literature on teaching reflective practice within schools of education; and Beauchamp (2015), who discussed instruction in reflective practice across teacher education programs. Discipline-specific literature reviews concerning teacher education, likewise, have been conducted. Standal and Moe (2013) reviewed the literature on reflection for physical education teachers, Lindroth (2015) catalogued the use of reflective journals in the education of future music teachers, Saylor and Johnson (2014) synthesized the research on reflective practice in the training of mathematics and science teachers, and Farrell (2016) collected literature on training in reflective practice for Teachers of English as a Second Language (TESOL). The healthcare field is also well-represented in the literature. McLeod, Barr, and Welch (2015), as well as Fragkos (2016), analyzed teaching practices across healthcare fields; Bulman, Lathlean, and Gobbi (2014)
reviewed the research on teaching reflective practice within schools of nursing; and Tsingos et al. (2014) detailed the current research on teaching reflection to pharmacy students. Therefore, those equipping future healthcare providers and educators have a vast array of research on which to draw for literature reviews, and the dearth of research on reflective practice in other helping professions, such as social work and religious leadership, represents one of the most significant literature gaps in the teaching of reflective practice.

**Research about the online learning environment.** Additionally, the fully online learning environment as a method of distance education as perceived by instructors within the helping professions remains underrepresented in the current literature. As illustrated in Table 1, several web-based methods have been included in residential, partially residential, and, to a lesser degree, wholly online courses and have been reported in the literature, including journals, portfolios, discussion boards, blogs, videos, videoconferences, chat and social networking, simulations, and wikis. Although the wholly online environment (i.e., no face-to-face residential instruction) is increasing in prominence, given the growing number of professional degrees in religious leadership (ATS, 2018c), social work (Moore et al., 2015), education (Downing & Dyment, 2013), and healthcare (Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, 2018; Gonzaga University, 2018) obtained “exclusively” (Seaman et al., 2018, p. 5) by distance in the online learning environment, this delivery method primarily has been investigated from the student perspective within the helping professions (Cunningham, 2014; Doehring, 2011, 2013; Fitch et al., 2016; Hatcher, 2013; Lilienthal et al., 2017; Manburg et al., 2017; Manning & Pogorzelska-Maziarz, 2017; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014). Given faculty’s role in “the planning, design, and oversight of its [an institution’s] curriculum” (ATS, 2015c, p. 13), presenting the voices of those faculty who are obliged to help develop and implement curricula (American Association of
University Professors, 1990, 2001) may prove helpful to administrators, instructors, and researchers. Furthermore, most articles that discuss reflection in the wholly online environment present the views of faculty at a single institution despite the importance of inter-institutional collaboration (Higher Learning Commission, 2016) that encourages “cooperation and sharing of resources with other institutions” (ATS, 2015c, p. 30). Consequently, presenting the views of instructors in the wholly online environment from several colleges or universities may lend depth to the current discussion of teaching students to be reflective practitioners in the online environment.

Summary

My research was grounded in the established literature yet addressed perceived gaps within the scholarship of learning and teaching reflective practice. Scholars have investigated numerous aspects of instruction for reflective practice, but have not yet agreed on a common purpose for and definition of reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Collin et al., 2013, Comer, 2016), have relied almost exclusively on the theories of Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), have restricted themselves predominantly to the helping professions of healthcare and education, and have not yet investigated the views of instructors teaching in the wholly online environment. The diverse instructional topics presented in the current literature have included methods such as the use of stepwise procedures, the arts, and collaborative dialogue, as well as common outcomes achieved through reflective activities, including personal qualities (e.g., self-efficacy and emotional intelligence) and professional attributes, such as caring and empathy. The current literature also has discussed challenges associated with instructing others in reflective practice, such as individual and cultural differences that influence students’ reflective assignments and similarly have noted audience members’ role in influencing reflective assignments. Although
reflection assisted with online technologies – such as journals, portfolios, discussion boards, blogs, videos, videoconferences, chat and social networking, simulations, and wikis – has been reported in the literature, these Internet-assisted reflection forms have been presented in a variety of formats involving varying levels of residential instruction, and the perspectives of faculty in the emerging arena of wholly online courses and degree programs remain largely unvoiced in the literature. Therefore, a gap in current literature is a lack of research that incorporates theorists who focus more on reflection in action, as opposed to the artifacts presented for evaluation (Brown et al., 2013; Collin et al., 2013; Fragkos, 2016; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Leigh, 2016) that investigate helping professions other than healthcare or education, and that present the perspectives of professors in the wholly online environment. My research addressed this gap in the current literature by probing the definition, as well as the purpose, of reflection; employing a novel theoretical framework that blends reflective practice with transformative learning; investigating a helping profession other than healthcare or education (i.e., religious leadership); and portraying faculty views in the wholly online learning environment.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. This chapter provides specific information on the methods that were employed in my study by outlining the purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) of participants, as well as the triangulation of data through individual interviews supplemented by letters to future theological educators and responses to focus group questions. Additionally, this chapter describes how I analyzed the data with the modified van Kaam (1959, 1966) method developed by Moustakas (1994) in conjunction with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 12, 2018). Finally, this chapter provides details on my results’ trustworthiness using the four criteria established by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as well as the ethical nature of my study, which was modeled on Liberty University’s (2016c) Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines.

Design

Creswell (2013) recommended a qualitative study for a phenomenon about which little is known, such as the experience of teaching reflective practice in online theological education courses (Beaty, 2014; Ferguson, 2016). Therefore, my research was a qualitative study that was completed according to the approximate timeline in Appendix A and that utilized the phenomenological design, which Moustakas (1994) viewed as appropriate for investigating educational experiences and which has been employed in several studies investigating faculty perspectives on reflective practice (Binks et al., 2013; Clarke, 2014; Greenfield et al., 2014). Specifically, I employed the transcendental phenomenological method, which focuses on
describing participants’ shared experience and requires the bracketing, or époché, of the researcher’s lifeworld (Husserl, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (2012) initially developed this method in his philosophical writing on consciousness, and Merleau-Ponty (2002) advanced the technique by highlighting the body’s role in lived experience, while Giorgi (2009) and Moustakas (1994) created techniques for applying this method within the psychology field. However, Moustakas (1994) viewed this method as appropriate for any lived experience and specifically referenced an encounter in which an instructor felt uncomfortable, as he sensed that the student was “begging” (p. 96) him for something, such as approval or confirmation of his vocational decision, and subsequent educational researchers have affirmed the use of the transcendental phenomenological method in educational research (van Manen & Adams, 2010).

Although students and teachers individually construct meaning or consciousness from perceptions of the learning environment in Husserl’s (2012) philosophy, these perceptions are conveyed and changed through students and teachers’ social interactions. For Rasmussen (1998), individual perceptions of reality are constructed and transformed within the social system created by teachers and students through communication, “whose aim is to change people” (Rasmussen, 1998, p. 568). Therefore, communication represents how discrete, conscious states can interact and influence one another and accounts for how these disconnected individuals can interact in an educatively meaningfully manner. Moreover, conscious understandings of experiences, which form part of the learner’s lifeworld, are influenced by interactions with the external realm, including “the sphere of experience with other sentient beings in a social realm” (Creely, 2018, p. 4) and, therefore, are influenced necessarily by discursive exchanges with instructors and peers. Thus, socially constructed knowledge, residing within individual learners and instructors’ consciousness, can be transmitted through social interactions (i.e., communication) and,
therefore, form the mechanism by which changes occur in these discrete elements of the instructional environment.

The transcendental phenomenological design aligned with my epistemological and ontological assumptions, as well as my study’s focus. As a critical realist (Bhaskar, 2008; Gorski, 2013; Maxwell, 2012, 2015), I view reality as being uniquely interpreted by individuals through interactions with conscious beings (e.g., divine and human people), as well as objects and places, external to themselves. However, as an evangelical Thomist (Geisler, 2003), or Christian Aristotelian (Muller, 1998, 2001), I maintain that an objective reality exists about which humans meaningfully, albeit imperfectly, can converse. Although essences derived from phenomenological investigations necessarily are imperfect and constrained by the participants contributing to the data utilized in constructing the reduction, these essences’ meanings are “recognizable” (van Manen & Adams, 2010, p. 454) by other humans because these humans and their world were created by a benevolent being who gave them a world with at least some sense of order, such as the seasons’ rhythms and other natural laws of the sciences (e.g., identifiable relationships between temperature, volume, and pressure as described in the ideal gas law).

Despite the interpretative influences that tinge all descriptive accounts (Vagle, 2014), transcendental phenomenology, through epoché, seeks to describe (Moustakas, 1994), rather than interpret (van Manen, 1997a, 1997b), participants’ perceptions and, therefore, unlike methods such as case studies, which are more closely aligned with positivist traditions, cohered with my views on the limited, yet nonetheless real, nature of meaningful knowledge that can be communicated to and shared among human beings. Moreover, because I maintain that knowledge is constructed by humans through their interactions with the world around them (Creely, 2018; Marques & Martino, 2017; Rasmussen, 1998), I believe that descriptions of
perceptions, which have been constructed by participants, then constructed again by researchers in their analysis of the participants’ descriptions of their perceptions, should precede thoroughgoing interpretations of these experiences. As Marques and Martino (2017) explained, “While the lifeworld frames the communicative interactions of the subjects, it transforms itself and changes through these interactions” (p. 313). I am attracted to Moustakas’ (1994) formulation of transcendental phenomenology, as it describes the steps required for data analysis and, thus, supplies a framework for understanding, at least partially, how I constructed my understanding of the perceptions of reality that the participants described. Furthermore, my study’s focus was the shared experience of a group of individuals (i.e., instructors of theological reflection at ATS schools), and transcendental phenomenology seeks to examine the shared experience of a group of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). By communicating with their students, these instructors influence their understandings of the learning experience, as well as their students’ understanding of theological reflection and learning about this reflection form (Creely, 2018; Marques & Martino, 2017; Rasmussen, 1998). Consequently, transcendental phenomenology seemed to be an acceptable method for a researcher professing a constructivist epistemology and realist ontology while studying the shared experience of a group of individuals, such as instructors, within the online learning environment.

In accord with Seaman et al. (2018) and ATS (2015d) Standard ES.4.1, I defined the online environment as a form of distance education in which “the majority of instructor-directed learning” (ATS, 2015d, p. 12) occurs in situations “without students and instructors being in the same location” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) through “synchronous or asynchronous … online[-] … assisted instruction” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10), which includes “regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10). Furthermore, I defined theological reflection as the
practice of considering experience and the beliefs manifested within these experiences vis-à-vis scripture, culture, and tradition to refine, when necessary, underlying assumptions and future actions (Austin, 2017; Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Hey & Roux, 2012; Thompson et al., 2008; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995). Transcendental phenomenology was an appropriate method for investigating the phenomenon of teaching theological reflection because Moustakas (1994) and van Manen (1997b) recommended phenomenology for educational research, and numerous scholars have followed their advice when investigating faculty experiences (Binks et al., 2013; Clarke, 2014; Greenfield et al., 2014; Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Prior research has given voice to instructors of reflective practice in other helping professions such as education (Krutka, Bergman, Flores, Mason, & Jack, 2014), social work (Watts, 2015), and healthcare (Binks et al., 2013; Clarke, 2014), but has neglected to portray the experience of those who educate religious leaders about reflective practice in the online environment (Beaty, 2014; Ferguson, 2016). By presenting the voices of those who instruct future religious leaders in theological reflection, I addressed this significant literature gap.

**Research Questions**

This study was designed to investigate the lived experience of online instructors of theological reflection through a transcendental phenomenological investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Because reflection is conceptualized as a shared dialogue in which students and instructors engage in bidirectional communication about professional practice (Yagata, 2017), giving voice to the lived experience of online instructors of theological reflection was necessary to discuss the teaching of reflective practice meaningfully. Prior research has given voice to the experiences of students engaging in theological reflection (Hatcher, 2013; Doehring, 2013), but relatively few studies have integrated the perspectives of those who provide instruction in
theological reflection (Wong, 2009, 2011). While research on residential instructors’
perspectives is important, the increase in online theological education (Tanner, 2015, 2017)
called for the inclusion of the voices of those who provide such instruction in the online
environment. Specifically, this study answered the following questions:

**Central Question (CQ):** How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the
Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection
in the online environment?

**Sub-Question One (SQ1):** What do participants describe as the content and context of
their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

**Sub-Question Two (SQ2):** How do participants describe the benefits encountered in
their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

**Sub-Question Three (SQ3):** How do participants describe the challenges encountered in
their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

**Setting**

The settings for this research were Christian institutions located in North America that
are accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS) and have common academic
standards designed to educate future religious leaders such as ministers, pastoral counselors, and
worship directors. Although governance varies within ATS schools, the instructors whom I
interviewed were accountable most directly to a departmental dean or chair and, therefore, are
approachable by contacting these officials. For example, ATS schools operating independently
from universities usually are governed by either a president or board of directors who appoint
administrators, such as provosts or vice presidents, and these administrators, in turn, select deans
or similar officials who oversee academic departments within the seminary (Asbury Theological
Seminary, 2018; Dallas Theological Seminary, 2014; Saint Patrick’s Seminary and University, 2014). ATS schools operating within larger universities’ structures, likewise, often are overseen by administrators appointed by the president or board of the university in which they are situated (Abilene Christian University, 2016; Catholic University of America, 2016a, 2016b; Loyola University Chicago, 2018; Samford University, 2016; University of Notre Dame, 2018). All Catholic seminaries follow the governance structures outlined in the Code of Canon Law (Catholic Church, 1983, 2001) and the Program of Priestly Formation (Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2002; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2006) to ensure that all those attending the seminary are educated in such a way as to fulfill the Church’s mission. Thus, diocesan seminaries – such as Saint John’s Seminary in Boston, which comprises a seminary operating independently of a university – are governed by a board of trustees whose chair (in the case of Saint John’s Seminary, the Archbishop of Boston) (Saint John’s Seminary, 2016), in turn, appoints an administrator who, for instance, chooses departmental overseers (Saint Patrick’s Seminary and University, 2017). Consequently, the participants involved in my study were accountable most directly to the dean or chair within their departments. The faculty of ATS schools comprise 7.1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 7.6% Black, 13.9% Hispanic, 0.1% Native American, 0.6% Nonresident Alien, 76.4% White, 0.6% Multiracial, and 3.2% of unknown ethnicity, with 24.4% female and 75.6% male (Association of Theological Schools, 2016, Table 3.1-A). The faculty involved in my study taught in the online environment and, therefore, provided “the majority of instructor-directed learning” (ATS, 2015d, p. 12) in situations “without students and instructors being in the same location” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) through “synchronous or asynchronous … online[-] … assisted instruction” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) and with “regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10). While participants were
drawn from institutions accredited by the ATS, interviews with these instructors were conducted through a password-protected, online videoconferencing platform in a private office occupied solely by the researcher, in which others could not easily overhear the conversations, and communications concerning letters to future theological educators, as well as member checks of interview transcripts, were conducted through the researcher’s password-protected, institutional email system.

Christian institutions accredited by ATS institutions were chosen as the setting, given their shared religious tradition, which plays a role in theological reflection (Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Porter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2008). The common academic standards (ATS, 2014a, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d) adhered to by all member schools, likewise, ensured similar faculty qualifications and course requirements contributing to the cultivation of a shared experience among instructors participating in the research. Furthermore, online courses in theological reflection were chosen as the focus of inquiry because scant research exists on such courses (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013), yet reflection has been proposed as a method of formation for the growing number of religious leaders pursuing their degrees online (Brown, 2016; Hockridge, 2013, 2015; Tanner, 2015, 2017). Therefore, the chosen setting represented a cohesive unit in which shared experiences could occur, as well as a neglected, yet significant, educational arena within the literature.

Participants

The participants in this research study comprised a purposive sample (Creswell, 2013) of online instructors of theological reflection employed at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools (ATS, 2015a). I involved enough faculty members in this study to reach data saturation – 13 professors (Moustakas, 1994) – and the demographics of these
instructors are detailed in Table 2. The participants were selected by examining the list of schools accredited by ATS (2017a) and selecting schools that described themselves as Christian in publicly accessible documents, such as academic catalogs, or that were affiliated with a denomination categorized as Christian by Atwood (2010) and offered “comprehensive distance education” (ATS, 2014c, p. 11), which meant that they offered six or more courses by distance at the time of this research. I then contacted the dean of the school of religion or a similar administrator (e.g., departmental chair or director of theological field education) at each of these institutions to ask them for site permission. If a dean granted site permission, I then contacted the chair of the Institutional Review Board or equivalent (e.g., Research Ethics Board) to secure institutional research permission, then contacted the deans for a list of potential participants (Appendices B and C). I only contacted deans employed at ATS schools (ATS, 2017b) that offered “comprehensive distance education” (ATS, 2014c, p. 11), which meant that the institution offered six or more courses online, as these institutions were more likely to offer supervised ministry experiences in the online learning environment.

Table 2  

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alistair</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>65 or Over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felix</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
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<tr>
<td>George</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Howard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isaac</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karl</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>65 or Over</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>50-64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matthew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>40-49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Names listed are pseudonyms; age ranges resemble those used in ATS Annual Data Tables.
In my initial communication with these administrators, I outlined my study’s purpose and described classes in which theological reflection often is included, such as field practicums or apprenticeships; clinical pastoral education experiences; mentored ministry placements; foundation courses in which students develop their personal theologies or vision statements for leadership, worship, or mission; and courses on spiritual or ethical formation that require students to develop the ability to exegete the text of their lives. Course catalogs were helpful when drafting emails to individual administrators, as some classes that involve theological reflection include these words or similar phrases in their course descriptions. If administrators were unresponsive to my initial communication, I contacted them again about the study through email at least twice (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). To obtain rich data sources, I asked administrators, who provided letters granting site permission (Appendices B and C) and whose institutions supplied IRB or Research Ethics Board approval, to email the names of instructors known to them by reputation or through course evaluations or a similar measure as effective instructors of theological reflection. Finally, I requested that they include, if possible, the names of individuals employed by other Christian ATS schools who might have been interested in participating in my research to derive the benefits of snowball (Creswell, 2013) or referral (Bernard, Wutich, & Ryan, 2016) sampling.

After obtaining full approval from Liberty’s IRB and receiving lists of potential participants from departmental administrators, I contacted potential participants through a recruitment letter (Appendix D), and when necessary, a follow-up recruitment letter (Appendix E) sent by e-mail at least twice (Dillman et al., 2014). The initial recruitment and follow-up letters explained my study’s purpose and contained a copy of the informed consent letter.
(Appendix F) with a request that the participants reply by emailing back the signed consent letter to acknowledge their willingness to participate in the research. Because enough administrators from ATS schools replied, I did not need to consult with my dissertation committee about contacting administrators within the ATS, nor the ATS group on Technology in Theological Education (ATS, 2014b), as well as representatives of professional societies such as the Association for Theological Field Education (ATFE), the Catholic Association for Theological Field Education (CATFE), the Association of Youth Ministry Educators (AYME), and similar groups to obtain potential participants’ names. I also did not need to discuss the possibility of utilizing participants from Christian institutions certified by organizations resembling the ATS, such as the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS), the European Evangelical Accrediting Association (EEAA), the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), the Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCB), member associations of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI), or schools within the Association for Biblical Higher Education (ABHE) or Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU), which offered undergraduate degrees in ministry that often included training in theological reflection (Leyda, 2009), as well as practical theology (Paver, 2006; Senter, 2014). Additionally, I did not need to discuss the possibility of recruiting participants from the Association of Christian Distance Education (ACCESS) or Faith-Based Online Learning Directors (FOLD), which provided instruction to future religious leaders and offered courses on theological reflection.
Procedures

To ensure my study’s ethical integrity, I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix G) prior to conducting the research, as well as site permission (Appendices B and C) and the participants’ informed consent (Appendix F). I also conducted a pilot study with non-participants to improve the efficacy of the interview guides and instructions for the letters to future theological educators (Appendices H, I, and J), as well as to address any technological difficulties with the videoconferencing platform. After pilot testing was completed, I contacted deans to solicit site permission (Appendices B and C), as well as the names of seemingly effective online instructors of theological reflection. After receiving site permission letters and full Institutional Review Board approval, I contacted potential participants by email, obtained signed consent letters (Appendix F), and conducted the individual interviews (Appendix H). Subsequently, I distributed the instructions for the letters to future theological educators (Appendix I) and completed the focus group interviews (Appendix J). To ensure participants’ confidentiality, I recorded the individual interviews and focus groups with videoconferencing software, as well as an external recorder (Salmons, 2014), and stored the letters to future theological educators, as well as the interview transcripts and recordings, in password-protected electronic files. Finally, the codebook that linked pseudonyms with actual names was stored apart from the other data in a locked filing cabinet to decrease the likelihood of linking participants and their employing institutions with comments made during interviews or in letters to future theological educators (Forrester, 2010).

The Researcher's Role

Throughout the research process, I bracketed my assumptions about reflective practice, ontology, and epistemology so that they did not inordinately impact data collection and analysis.
As a critical realist (Maxwell, 2012, 2015) and evangelical Thomist (Geisler, 2003), or Christian Aristotelian (Muller, 1998, 2001), I maintain that humans can dialogue meaningfully, albeit imperfectly, about a shared reality. This shared reality allowed me to develop, through transcendental phenomenology, the essence of the participants’ shared experience (Moustakas, 1994). However, as an evangelical Protestant, I may have given a more prominent role to Scripture in theological reflection that contrasted with other ecclesial families (Longkumer, Ho, & Andree, 2017) that may give greater authority to church doctrine, culture, or experience (Fuller & Wright, 2015; Payne, 2008; van den Toren & Hoare, 2015; National Association of Evangelicals, n.d.; World Evangelical Alliance, 2001). Consequently, I deem my views on theological reflection, as well as my positive views on reflection, to be a source of continual development (Bleach, 2014; Jonasson, Nyström, & Rydström, 2017; O’Brien, 2016) to avoid distorting participant responses or neglecting the empirical literature that has highlighted problems associated with reflection, such as an aversion to reflection expressed by some extraverts (Francis & Smith, 2016); artificiality (Ross, 2014a, 2014b); rumination (Leigh & Bailey, 2013); self-absorption that excludes an analysis of others’ behavior (Lane, McMaster, Adnum, & Cavanagh, 2014; Jiang; 2017) or alternative perspectives (McNaughton, 2016); and possible tensions in professional relationships due to criticisms of workplace cultures discovered through reflection (Börjesson, Cedersund, & Bengtsson, 2015). Prior to and while conducting the research, I maintained a journal (Appendix K), in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings on the investigative process and in which I acknowledged my personal views on reflection so that they could be bracketed properly through epoché during my study’s data analysis phase.

While my views, as an evangelical, on Scripture’s role in reflection needed to be bracketed throughout my research, my overall Christian beliefs may have helped cultivate
meaningful, but appropriate, relationships with the participants. My employing institution’s ideology, like those of the participating instructors, is explicitly Christian and perhaps contributed to developing rapport with the participants because many Christians tend to be cooperative with and trusting toward those within their religious networks (Buttelmann & Böhm, 2014; Porter & Capellan, 2014). Rapport may have been cultivated further considering that deans of religion departments or individual instructors – who are members of or participants in the National Dialogue of Evangelicals and Catholics (2017), Evangelical Theological Society, or the American Academy of Religion – may have been familiar with the name or face of my husband, a professor of theology and apologetics, who attends these organizations’ annual conferences and has published works on systematic (Jowers, 2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2012; Jowers & House, 2012) and ecumenical theology (2017a, 2017b), as well as apologetics (House & Jowers, 2011). However, I do not attend these conferences, and neither I nor my husband attends annual ATS conferences or preconference meetings for academic deans (ATS, 2018a). Consequently, neither I nor my husband had any personal relationship with the deans or participants whom I contacted and did not exert authority over their institutions or accrediting organizations. Therefore, participants should have felt comfortable discussing their instructional practices with me while simultaneously not feeling compelled to engage in the research or feeling that I intended to harm them or their institutions by researching their instructional practices. Therefore, I answered “no” to the question concerning conditions for a conflict of interest specified on Liberty University’s IRB application (Liberty University, 2018c, Question 17): “Do you have a position of academic or professional authority over the participants (e.g., the participants’ teacher, principal, supervisor, or district/school administrator)?” (Question 17).
Data Collection

Data triangulation helps researchers examine an issue from multiple perspectives to derive a panoramic view of the experience and was achieved in this study by viewing the experience of online instruction in theological reflection through individual interviews, letters to future theological educators, and focus group interviews (Schwandt, 2014). The initial interview about the participants’ experiences teaching reflection (Appendix H) helped me contextualize the participants’ responses in the subsequent stages of data collection, which included a letter to future theological educators and a focus group interview. Furthermore, this individual interview may have allowed participants to become familiar with the videoconferencing platform utilized in the focus group interview. Probes, listed as bullet points beneath the primary questions for the individual interview questions (Appendix H), were developed for the focus group questions based on the participants’ letters to future theological educators and responses to individual interview questions. All data collection instruments were reviewed by my research consultant and committee chairperson to ensure face and content value, as well as reliability. Likewise, these instruments were pilot tested with nonparticipants after being approved by Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Individual Interviews

Researchers such as Too (2013) have employed interviews to better understand the experience of learning or teaching reflection. Therefore, participants were interviewed through the online platform, and a professional transcriber transcribed their interviews. The interviews were recorded with the videoconferencing platform WebEx (Hamilton, 2014), as well as an external recorder (Salmons, 2014; Tuttas, 2014). The interview protocol appears in Appendix H and followed guidelines established by Creswell (Figures 7.4 and 7.5, 2013). I provided
participants with instructions on how to access the videoconferencing platform, but if they experienced insurmountable difficulties accessing the portal, I contacted them by phone, as in research by Forrest (2013).

Standardized, Open-Ended Interview Questions:

1. Please describe your journey in becoming an instructor and the discipline areas in which you currently teach or have taught.
2. Please describe your experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment.
3. How have you explained the purpose of theological reflection to students?
4. How have you used instructional resources or techniques to teach students about theological reflection?
5. What has influenced your experience of teaching theological reflection online?
6. What benefits, if any, have you as an instructor experienced while teaching theological reflection in the online environment?
7. What benefits, if any, have your students seemed to experience after receiving instruction in theological reflection in the online environment?
8. What challenges, if any, have you encountered while teaching theological reflection in the online environment?
9. How have you overcome these challenges?
10. How would you advise others who were considering teaching theological reflection online?
11. What else should others know about teaching theological reflection online?
Interview question one, like interview question five, related to Sub-Question One (SQ1), concerning influences on the experience of teaching theological reflection, and interview question one further served as an icebreaker question to build rapport, as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2011), as well as Patton (2014). Interview questions two and four concerned the Central Question (CQ), as well as Sub-Question One (SQ1), about experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment, which is underrepresented in the literature, as evidenced by the scant research on this topic (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; Wong, 2016), which frequently employs a variety of methods, such as discussion boards (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013), case studies (Blodgett & Floding, 2015), field placements (Wong, 2016), and creative writing (Walton, 2014). By asking participants about their experience teaching theological reflection and the methods through which they instruct others in the art of reflective ministry, I have given voice to an underrepresented group within the literature.

Interview questions six and seven related to Sub-Question Two (SQ2), concerning the benefits of teaching reflection in the online environment, such as providing access to a greater number of students (Brown, 2016; MacLeod, 2010; Etzel, Jones, Jackson, & Cartwright, 2017; Scharen & Miller, 2017; Thompson & MacLeod, 2015), as well as the benefits associated with learning to be reflective, which have included professional identity (Hatcher, 2013), critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Pack, 2014), integration of theory with practice (Foley, 2014; Wong, 2011), self-efficacy (Stahl et al., 2016; Tan, 2013), and the ability to pursue lifelong learning for sustainable professional practice (Nash, 2014; Nuzum et al., 2015). By investigating the benefits perceived to be associated with teaching theological reflection in the online environment, I have helped interested researchers, administrators, and
instructors advance the knowledge of reflective practice for future religious leaders and all professions interested in cultivating mindful practitioners (Johns, 2010).

Interview questions three, eight, and nine addressed Sub-Question Three (SQ3), concerning the challenges of teaching reflection in the online environment. Prior research has noted the difficulty that many students experience in learning reflection due to fear of judgment by peers (Dalgarno et al., 2015; Testa & Egan, 2015) or instructors (Binks et al., 2013; Karpa & Chernomas, 2013; Marsh, 2014); lack of clarity concerning the definition of reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Rose, 2016); student characteristics, such as life experience or personal preferences, which may influence reflective abilities (Cook et al., 2017; Ruiz-López et al., 2015; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018; Wong, 2009); and cultural differences concerning the expression of divergent opinions (Kuswandono, 2014; Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016; Wanda et al., 2016; Zhan & Wan, 2016). Cultural differences are especially important at ATS schools, where international students represent 10% of the student body, and minority students represent 30% of the student body (Tanner, 2015). Additional challenges discussed in the literature concern fear of judgment by peers (Testa & Egan, 2015) or instructors (Binks et al., 2013; Marsh, 2014); the asynchronous nature of online education, which limits interaction (Rivers et al., 2014); difficulty in cultivating the necessary skills for the relational professions without routinely interacting face-to-face with the students (Hockridge, 2013); and the complex process of providing spiritual formation and liturgical or pastoral counseling skills to future religious leaders online (Scharen & Miller, 2017). Similarly, question 10 offered participants an opportunity to approach their experience from an additional perspective by assuming the role of an expert (Patton, 2014), and question 11 offered participants an opportunity to present any additional information not discussed in the prior interview.
questions (Patton, 2014). By giving voice to instructors of theological reflection in the online environment, I have enriched the current literature, which has focused on other caring professions, such as education (Beauchamp, 2015) and healthcare (Goulet et al., 2015).

**Letter to Future Theological Educators**

Participants received an email asking them to provide advice for those preparing to teach theological reflection in the form of a letter to future theological educators. Issues that participants considered when writing these letters – as well as a detailed discussion of the relationship between the possible issues covered in these letters, my research questions, and the broader literature – are presented in Appendix I. I asked participants to submit their letters to me by email and contacted unresponsive participants approximately every two weeks at least three times (Dillman et al., 2014; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2006). Writing letters to people in the future is a common form of data acquisition (Lindsay & Schwind, 2015), and written responses were recommended by Vagle (2014), as well as van Manen and Adams (2010), as a method of data collection in phenomenological research and have been employed by other researchers to investigate reflection experiences (Colomer, Pallisera, Fullana, Burriel, & Fernández, 2013; Laverty, 2012).

**Focus Group Interview**

During videoconferences, approximately five to eight participants (Krueger & Casey, 2014) were interviewed using the focus group interview protocol provided in Appendix J. When necessary, participants were asked to clarify their answers using the pause-and-probe method (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Interviews were conducted with participants through the videoconferencing platform and recorded with the videoconferencing software, as well as an external recorder (Salmons, 2014; Tuttas, 2014), for subsequent verbatim transcription. Other
researchers similarly have employed focus group interviews in conjunction with individual interviews (Bikos, DePaul-Chism, Forman, & King, 2013; Chavez, 2015; Strand et al., 2015). If participants were unable to join the videoconference, they were included in the videoconference via an audio connection, such as a phone (Tuttas, 2014). If an insufficient number of participants were able to meet synchronously, I used one or more mini-focus groups of three or more participants (Bloor, Frankland, Thomas, & Robson, 2001; Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). I did not need to develop an alternative method to the focus group, such as an asynchronous interactional platform (Bloor et al., 2001; Liamputtong, 2011; McCann & Huntley-Moore, 2016; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Focus Group Interview Questions:

1. Please introduce yourself to the focus group by providing your name, a summary of your teaching experience, and your favorite resource (e.g., book or website) on theological reflection.

2. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “theological reflection?”

3. Please describe ways in which you have instructed students about theological reflection in the online environment.

4. What is your most vivid memory of teaching theological reflection in the online learning environment?

5. What or who has impacted your instruction of theological reflection?

6. In what ways, if any, have you found the experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment rewarding?

7. In what ways, if any, has learning about theological reflection seemed to positively influence your students?
8. In what ways, if any, have you found teaching theological reflection in the online environment challenging?

9. What resources, if any, have you experienced as useful in overcoming these challenges?

10. How would you advise those who were seeking to develop online courses in theological reflection?

11. What else should others know about teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

Question one served as an icebreaker question to make participants feel comfortable (Patton, 2014). Questions two, three, and four related to the Central Question about the experience of teaching theological reflection. Question two specifically addressed the meaning of theological reflection, as the definition of reflection has not been established yet in the literature (Beauchamp, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Goulet et al., 2015; Nguyen et al., 2014; Rose, 2016), and theological reflection incorporates a diverse set of concepts ranging from prayer to creative writing (Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Chandler, 2016; Hey & Roux, 2012; Le Cornu, 2015; O’Connor & Meakes, 2008; Porter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2008; Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995). Question five probed the influences on the participants’ teaching of reflection, as recommended by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013) in phenomenological studies. Interview questions six and seven addressed Sub-Question Two (SQ2), concerning the benefits of teaching reflection, which have included critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Pack, 2014), self-efficacy (Stahl et al., 2016; Tan, 2013), identity development (Hatcher, 2013), the integration of theory with practice (Foley, 2014), and the ability to pursue lifelong learning (Nash, 2014). Interview questions eight and nine related to Sub-Question Three (SQ3), regarding the challenges of teaching reflection, such as instructing students in reflection from non-Western
cultures who may be hesitant to challenge majority beliefs (Kuswandono, 2014; Zhan & Wan, 2016), as well as the necessity of creating a sufficiently safe atmosphere in which students do not fear excessive criticism (Binks et al., 2013; Foley, 2017; Testa & Egan, 2015). Question 10 provided participants with an opportunity to present their views as experts advising novices to give them an additional perspective from which to consider their teaching (Patton, 2014), and question 11 allowed participants to present any remaining thoughts on their experience of teaching theological reflection online (Patton, 2014).

By investigating the experience of instructing others in theological reflection, I have supplemented the current literature, which has not addressed this topic fully (Beaty, 2014), as evidenced by the handful of studies on this issue (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013). While prior research has concentrated on helping professions such as education (Beauchamp, 2015) and healthcare (Goulet et al., 2015), my research has enriched the current discussion by adding the voices of those who teach online theological reflection.

**Data Analysis**

Phenomenological analysis seeks to distill massive amounts of qualitative data from sources such as interviews and written responses into a one- or two-paragraph reductive summary of the most essential aspects of the inquiry’s focus (Moustakas, 1994; Vagle, 2014). The steps involved in phenomenological analysis were developed by Moustakas (1994) and include epoché, or bridling the researcher’s assumptions and personal biases (Vagle, 2009, 2010, 2014); horizontalization of the data, which creates a textural description of the what of the experience; imaginative variation of the data, which reveals the necessary conditions for drafting the how or a structural description of the experience; and a synthesis of the resulting textural and structural descriptions, which conveys the essence of the experience being investigated. By
reading the paragraphs that represent my data’s totality, others virtually can experience my participants’ perceptions of teaching theological reflection in the online environment at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools at a given point in time, as reported in my condensation of the data.

**Epoché**

Epoché allows researchers to set aside their assumptions and personal biases so that participants’ voices can emerge prior to and throughout data collection and analysis. I began this process by acknowledging my relationship to the research setting and topic in the appropriate sections of my dissertation, Situation to Self and Researcher’s Role. Likewise, I maintained a research journal (Appendix K) in the form of an MS Word document in which I recorded my thoughts and feelings about the inquiry’s focus, initial reactions to the participants, insights concerning relevant themes discovered within the interviews and written responses, and any other reactions to the inquiry process that may have tinged my data collection or analysis (Ahern, 1999). Therefore, this journal helped bracket my lifeworld, as well as develop meaningful insights on the data by contextualizing conclusions drawn from the results with my emotions and understandings of the participants’ views (Abawi, 2012; Creswell. 2013; Saldaña, 2015).

Although I never can remove all my biases and assumptions through the process of epoché, I have acknowledged these biases to become more aware of their impact on the investigation and to allow my readers to determine whether I adequately set aside my views to report the experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment, as conveyed by the instructors in their interviews and written responses.

**Phenomenological Reduction**

The purpose of horizontalization is to consider all portions of the data equally and distill
the most salient aspects of the phenomenon for the individual and combined participants that can be represented in a textural description of the experience. After uploading the transcribed interviews and written responses into the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, NVivo (Version 12, 2018) instead of Atlas.ti (Muhr, 2016), I began horizontalization by discerning, then coding, the “invariant qualities of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 195) that represented the fundamental textural descriptions of the experience for the participants. These invariant qualities of the experience were determined through procedures such as cyclical reading of the transcribed data combined with analytic memoing (Groenewald, 2008; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013) and the two questions included in the modified van Kaam (1959, 1966) method developed by Moustakas: “Does it [a statement] contain a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient for understanding it?” [and] “Is it possible to abstract and label it?” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 136). Statements that fulfilled these two criteria represented invariant qualities of the phenomenon and subsequently were reduced to “nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping statements” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 195) clustered into themes with techniques discussed in qualitative coding overviews. Techniques for coding included methods from discourse, literary, and dramaturgical analysis, such as noticing repeated terms or phrases, metaphors, words frequently mentioned near one another (cooccurrences), assumptions, and avoided topics (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2005; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Saldaña, 2015; Wengraf, 2001). These codes then were grouped into themes using methods such as conceptual or taxonomic diagramming (Bazeley, 2009; Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Bernard et al., 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013; Friese, 2014; McCracken, 1988; Miles et al., 2013; Richards, 2014; Saldaña, 2015; Woolf & Silver, 2017a, 2017b), verified by ensuring that they were either expressed or implied in the data (Moustakas,
1994), and subsequently interwoven into textural descriptions of the experience for the individual and combined participants, which included verbatim quotes from the data to render these descriptions more authentic and, therefore, representative of the phenomenon.

**Structural Descriptions and Essence of the Phenomenon**

After creating the textural descriptions, I analyzed them by engaging in imaginative variation, the process of analyzing participants’ statements about what they experienced to discern the conditions or structures that seemingly allowed these experiences to occur, then subsequently developed structural descriptions of the experiences for individual and combined participants. Imaginative variation – also known as eidetic, or free, variation – involved approaching participants’ descriptions of their experience from a variety of perspectives, such as antonymous meanings or alternative roles (Flick, 2013; Giorgi, Giorgi, & Morley, 2017; Husserl, 1975; Moran, 2000; Moustakas, 1994). By examining the participants’ experiences from numerous perspectives, I sought to identify the underlying factors that created the structures of space, time, relationships, and material objects that allowed the phenomenon to occur (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1997b). For example, van Manen and Adams (2010) recommended considering the phenomenon of secrecy from the diametrical perspectives of secrecy and privacy (i.e., the individual whose secret is being preserved and the individual violating this privacy by divulging the secret). When I had developed a list of structural qualities that seemed to undergird the participants’ experiences, I clustered these qualities for the individual participants, thereby creating structural descriptions that represent the phenomenon’s organizing framework for each instructor (Moustakas, 1994; Riessman, 2008, 2011). To complete the phenomenological reduction process, I blended the individual textural and structural descriptions into textural-structural depictions of the experience for each participant,
then subsequently synthesized these individual textural-structural accounts into a coherent narrative representing the essence of the phenomenon of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for the group of professors (Eller, 2016; Fletcher-LaRocco, 2011; McNeil, 2015; Mitchell, 2015; Moustakas, 1994; Schmidt, 2005; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Schroeder, 2016). This essence represents the “phenomenon’s style, its way of being” (Dahlberg, 2006, p. 18) and communicates the participants’ lived experience to others.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthy results are those that can be viewed as adhering to established guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data, thereby yielding a relatively authentic representation of the data. Qualitative standards of trustworthiness differ from the more positivistic terms *reliability* and *validity*, found within quantitative literature (Creswell, 2013) and have been described as outlining guidelines for crafting “persuasive” (Creswell, 2013, p. 246) or “compelling” (Eisner, 2017, p. 110) interpretations of data from naturalistic inquiries. Within my research, I used the four criteria for trustworthiness detailed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility; dependability; confirmability; and transferability. Therefore, these criteria helped me present a holistic, albeit necessarily imperfect, portrayal of the data.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the authenticity of the researcher’s portrayal of the participants’ responses. A credible investigation attempts to present, rather than distort, the participants’ views (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2014). I achieved credible results through sustained interaction with the participants in individual interviews and in a focus group triangulated with data from my third form of data collection: letters to future theological educators (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Moreover, I provided participants with an opportunity to
review their transcribed responses to interview questions through member checking to ensure that they represented their views, not those of the researcher or transcriptionist. I did not need to provide participants with references to common transcription conventions, such as those published by Onwuegbuzie et al. (2009), Silverman (2016), or Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974). Finally, I presented rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences and conscientiously analyzed the data to present the participants’ views in a sincere and genuine manner (Conklin, 2007, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014).

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependable results are reliable and obtained through appropriate use of data collection and analysis techniques, as well as careful documentation of the research process (Creswell, 2013; Flick, 2014). To ensure that my findings were dependable, I utilized interview strategies and a written response format consistent with established practices by consulting with my dissertation committee at all stages of the research (Creswell, 2013), meticulously documenting my research procedures by providing copies of my data collection instruments (Appendices H, I, & J), and analyzing the data with the modified van Kaam (1959, 1966) method developed by Moustakas (1994). Likewise, confirmable results are those that can be replicated by other qualitative researchers investigating similar samples with the specified data collection and analysis techniques (Jensen, 2008a). To create confirmable results, I provided detailed information on the participants, setting, research procedures, and data analysis methods (Creswell, 2013).

**Transferability**

Transferable results are those that can be applied to similar contexts (Patton, 2014). Guidelines for creating transferable results include providing rich, thick descriptions of the
research setting and participants (Creswell, 2013) that include details on the research context’s boundaries and the relationships between this context and the research participants (Jensen, 2008b). Unlike quantitative research, which endeavors to create findings applicable to entire populations, qualitative research seeks to discover results that can be applied to contexts resembling those detailed within qualitative investigations (Erlandson, 1993). To ensure that my results could be generalized to similar settings, I provided thorough descriptions of my philosophical assumptions, purposively selected participants, research setting, and data collection and analysis procedures (Jensen, 2008b).

**Ethical Considerations**

To fulfill the three ethical principles of respect for people, benevolence, and justice – outlined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1978) – I obtained consent letters, ensured participants’ confidentiality, obtained IRB approval for my research, and demonstrated reciprocity by compensating my participants for their willingness to participate. The consent letters indicate respect for participants by allowing them to refrain from engaging in research that might harm them psychologically or physically (Cannon & Buttell, 2014; Creswell, 2013). The consent form for the proposed study (Appendix F) explained the voluntary nature of participation and participants’ ability to withdraw from the study at any time. Likewise, I demonstrated respect for participants by ensuring their confidentiality by replacing their names and their institution names with aliases; storing all electronic data in password-protected files; keeping all physical data, such as consent forms, in locked filing cabinets; and restricting access to the data to the researcher (Creswell, 2013). The codebook that linked participants’ pseudonyms with their employing institutions and actual names was stored in a locked filing cabinet apart from other
data to decrease the likelihood of connecting aliases and actual names (Forrester, 2010). Additionally, I adhered to Liberty University’s (2016c) IRB guidelines to ensure that my participants were in no way detrimentally affected by their cooperation with the research. Finally, I acted justly by compensating my participants for their involvement in the research by providing them with a copy of the study’s findings, as published on Liberty University’s (2015) digital commons; postal mailing a copy of a book that my family received at no cost from a Christian publishing company (Jowers, 2011) to their institutional libraries; and providing all participants with a complimentary gift card for an online bookstore. By demonstrating reciprocity and ensuring my participants’ safety, I hoped that they benefitted from the time that they sacrificed for my research.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methods used in my transcendental phenomenological study, which described the lived experiences of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Specifically, it explained the research design, questions, setting, and purposive sampling method for participants (Creswell, 2013), as well as summarized the relevant data-collection protocols used, such as interview guides and letters to future theological educators (Appendices B, C, & D). This chapter also described my role in the research; overviewed the data analysis tools used, including the modified van Kaam (1959, 1966) method developed by Moustakas (1994) and combined with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo (Version 12, 2018); and discussed procedures for ensuring the study’s trustworthiness and ethicality.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter begins by reviewing this study’s purpose, as well as the central research question and associated sub-questions it sought to answer. Next, the chapter presents thumbnail sketches of each of the participants, who were assigned pseudonyms that reflected their demographics, but nonetheless protected their confidentiality. The results of the data analysis then are presented as the themes of time, relationships, experience, and space, which are used to address the three sub-questions and central research question that this study asks. Finally, the textural element of conversations about theology and experience and the structural elements of space, relationships, and time are presented alongside a synthesis of this texture and these structures that formed the essence of teaching theological reflection, an essence that centered around the notion of hospitality in cyberspace for the purpose of fostering discussions about theology and experience.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Using the guiding theories of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) and transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990, 1991), this study sought to answer the below central research question: How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment? This central question was addressed through three sub-questions:
1. What do participants describe as the content and context of their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

2. How do participants describe the benefits encountered in their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

3. How do participants describe the challenges encountered in their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

**Participants**

As described in Chapter Three, all participants were employed at seminaries accredited by the ATS and were teaching courses involving theological reflection in the online environment. The work history and current work status of the participants detailed below was true at the time of the study and may subsequently change. Many of the participants had earned degrees from the institutions at which they were teaching, and several had earned these degrees by completing at least some online courses at their employing institutions. Nearly all the participants had five or more years of experience in ministry or missions, and many still were serving as part-time pastors at the very least. Additionally, many brought to the research decades of leadership experience in denominational or faith-based organizations in which they had served, as well as a deep thoughtfulness on theological reflection cultivated by writing about the relationship between ministry or missions and theology as part of their scholarly publications. Finally, a small number of the participants had vocational experience in fields outside of pastoral ministry or missions, which added a unique perspective on the relationship between the Christian life and its relationship to theological concepts. The below sections describe the participants with pseudonyms that reflect their ethnicity and gender but in no way resemble their actual names.
Alistair

Prior to becoming an instructor, Alistair served in ministry for 15 years and as an administrator in various Christian organizations for over two decades. He then became an adjunct and later a full-time faculty member at the seminary where he now teaches in the Pastoral Studies department, the same department in which he earned ministerial degrees. Alistair had written on the connection between theology and ministry, and as an “introvert,” he enjoyed the extra time afforded by the online environment to formulate responses to student assignments. During his interview, he commented, “I can take my time, not having to respond in the moment. This is one of the benefits for me as an introvert…. Not having to deliver in the exact moment is a benefit in the online world.” Alistair’s personality was reflected in his teaching style, and as he noted in his individual interview, he had explained to his students, “This is not [a] lecture class. A professor facilitates…. Each week, students take their turn as the presenter, and the rest of the class take[s] their turn … taking the case study apart … putting it back together.” Therefore, students enrolled in his courses could present their issues and seek input from their peers, while Alistair, assisting in the background, ensured that they did not stray too far from the course’s guiding purpose. In many ways, Alistair’s teaching style resembled his ministerial and organizational leadership style, in which he usually worked as a choreographer of his employing organizations’ activities.

Ben

Before entering higher education, Ben served as a chaplain for over three decades, after which he worked for several years as a high-ranking seminary administrator and as a seminary professor for over two decades in both the U.S. and abroad. Ben also served as a pastor for several churches for over a decade and continued to minister to a local congregation while
working as an administrator and professor at a nearby seminary. Ben was intensely concerned with the formation of his students and repeatedly referenced his desire to help students connect their daily lives to thoughts about God through theological reflection so that they could better minister to themselves and others. For example, during his interview, Ben noted that each week, he required his students to select an event from their lives, then ask themselves, “Where was God in this situation?” and write “a narrative of how you met God today in whatever situation it is.” He viewed connecting daily experiences to theology and thoughts of God as especially important for those who later would be ministering to other Christians. While overseeing a church of nearly 3,000 members, he wrote a weekly “pastoral letter, in which I said here is how I found God among you … how their lives were reflecting the Lord in their struggles, and how that helped me to see God in the midst of everyday living.” Ben felt that helping future pastors connect mundane experiences to theological concepts would foster their relationship with the divine, thereby enabling them to do the same with those to whom they would minister later.

He viewed his relationship with students as one of the primary means through which he helped them learn theological reflection. In his letter, he explained that professors should “instruct theological reflection personally…. Christ was personal. The incarnation is an example of the deepest possible personal relationship…. You must bridge the divide between student and teacher.” In his own teaching, he modelled this type of personal relationship with students by commenting on personal interests, such as sports, that they had mentioned in their assignments and by speaking with them either through videoconferences or phone calls. As he explained during his interview, “I might mention something as common as ‘I see you like the college football…. Wasn't that game last week … something?’ … Have the conversation with each student on the telephone or through Zoom … a synchronous element.” Ben’s connections with
his online students seemed to resemble his connections with the members of his past megachurch to whom he would write weekly congregational letters noting how God seemed to be working in their lives. Although he acknowledged that these individualized interactions required much effort and time, he felt that he was helping to develop clergy that could better minister to others. As he commented during his interview, “It is very time-consuming or time-investing,” but that he viewed this investment of time as profitable, given that he was able to help form future religious leaders who then would form their congregations. As he went on to say during the same interview, his goal in teaching theological reflection was to “prepare them individually to ask and answer the question about the presence of God in every area of their lives, and to equip them to do that with their parishioners.” Through his relationship with his students, he aimed to model the relationship that they should seek to cultivate with their congregants so that their future congregants could develop their relationships with God similarly by understanding the role of God’s providence in their lives.

Cameron

Cameron explained during his interview that he realized, as an adolescent, that his unique talent was instructing others: “I understood as a teenager that I had a gift of teaching. So, I taught … small group Bible studies…. I just kept trying to do, trying to try different things and bust in when … somebody wanted something else, that kind of thing.” After he attended seminary, he and his wife began serving as missionaries in Latin America, as both his wife and his denominational supervisor felt that he should be placed in an international context. Because Cameron had limited proficiency in the local language, he broke with the cultural and denominational traditions of meticulously preparing sermons that were to be read aloud and switched to a more dialogical form of preaching and teaching, in which the congregation helped
create the sermon by assisting Cameron with relevant vocabulary words. As he explained during his individual interview, he and his congregation “made a pact…. I'll teach you how to understand the Bible, … and … you teach me how to speak…. We have this participatory event which was totally out of my character,” as his seminary training had taught him to prepare sermons meticulously, then deliver them from the pulpit while the congregation remained silent.

Because he found teaching others about Scripture in a participatory manner to be engaging and effective, he used a similar method in his online courses that sought to integrate missions and theological beliefs. He dialogued with students in videoconferences and required that they also dialogue with missionaries, as well as those who support them. Students then were required to reflect theologically on issues and examine, for example, the Holy Spirit’s role in supporting missionaries and encouraging others in this mission work. Cameron’s willingness to accept his placement in an international context – for which he had, as he explained during his interview, only “18 hours” of language training – seemed to lead him to develop a dialogical style of teaching that he had found to be rewarding for both himself and his students.

Doug

After serving for nearly three decades as a minister, Doug began teaching at the seminary where he was employed. His many years in ministry influenced his teaching deeply, in which he sought to share with students the resources that he had found helpful. During his interview, Doug explained that when he designed his courses, he asked himself, “What really has made a difference in my own life? What has been the most helpful? What am I most appreciative of?” After considering these questions, he decided to include one of the most important tools that he had used for many years in his own ministry, both for reflection on his role in ministry and the role of the pastoral teams that he led at his current church: the practice of weekly personal
assessment. Doug provided details on his use of personal assessment later during his interview:

“I teach them … the rhythm of asking yourself the same questions at the end of every week.... [For example,] … ‘What did I do well? What did I not do well? … If people saw what I did in private, would they trust me more or less?’” Doug viewed habitual, regular evaluation of ministry practice as significant in his own ministry and wanted to share this resource with his students so that they could apply the practice in their own ministry settings. As noted during his interview, “It is not just a class, but this actually should be a practice. Like what we do in this group gives you tools … a discipline for them [the students] to continue to do.” Moreover, in his letter of advice, he recommended that instructors use case studies from the students’ current settings involving issues that were unresolved, so that they would begin integrating this habit of self-evaluation in their current context, thereby integrating “practical theology … within ministry contexts.” In other words, providing pastors with the resources that he viewed as crucial for effective ministry represented Doug’s primary purpose for teaching online courses.

Furthermore, Doug, who completed portions of his seminary degree online, found the diversity available in the online setting to be one of the primary advantages of this educational form. Doug felt that the alternative perspectives benefitted the other students by demonstrating how Scriptural truths could be embodied and expressed in various cultures. As he stated during his interview, “The online piece ... offers a chance for people all over this country, potentially all over the world, to connect.... Students who only hear from students in their same area are missing out big time.” For Doug, hearing examples of the Christian faith from other contexts represented one of the most appealing aspects of online education, helping him deal with some logistical challenges, such as coordinating videoconferences across time zones and managing the sometimes-challenging group dynamics present when people from different cultures interact
through spoken discourse. Managing group discussions sometimes was complicated when, for example, a student from one cultural context was being somewhat vocal during a discussion involving a student from a cultural context that placed high value on deference to others. As he commented during his interview, “But there are some cultures that will just … ‘back down’ is not the right word, but they will just kind of recluse because someone else from another culture is being stronger.” To encourage his more reticent students to speak in videoconferences, Doug would speak with the students individually, outside the videoconferences, and ask permission to call on them during an upcoming class. He often explained later during his interview that these students would respond by saying, “Thank you for asking. Yes, I would like that.” Thus, Doug found that the relational dynamics of intercultural communication sometimes required extra time on his part, but he deemed this time investment to be well worth the benefits received by hearing from students serving across a broad range of ministry contexts.

**Elizabeth**

Prior to becoming an instructor, Elizabeth served for several years as a coordinator for ministers in her local district area by supplying them with materials, ideas, and, most importantly, a sense of their identity as religious leaders. While working with these religious leaders, Elizabeth realized that they did not necessarily need a tangible resource, but rather a strong sense of the beliefs that they desired to embody in their religious communities. As she explained during her interview, “The challenge is not … the resources, but helping the ministers grow in their sense of who they are in this work … their sense of themselves before God, [and] what they are doing with the communities they are serving.” Elizabeth, during her interview, explained that she viewed helping area ministers develop their pastoral identities as “one of the most significant influences” on her teaching at the seminary.
Because Elizabeth viewed pastoral identity as one of the most crucial resources required of religious leaders, she assigned a central role to theological reflection and the development of a theological vision suitable for her students, as well as the religious contexts in which they were serving. Elizabeth spent time with field site mentors to help them understand theological reflection’s purpose and process by walking them through an example of meeting with students to discuss their theological reflection papers. As she explained during her interview, “When I do supervisor meetings, … we are kind of practicing responding to papers…. We read a sample paper from a real student and say, ‘OK, how would you respond to this student?’” Likewise, she used case studies and numerous theological reflection papers to help students develop, as stated during her interview, “the habit of mind and heart” required “to unpack the theological vision that's already in place in your [the student’s] head and … to tease out what might be the theological vision of other ministers or settings through evidence they might see in front of them.” During her individual interview, Elizabeth emphasized the necessity of theological reflection to help religious leaders understand the impression that their displays of hospitality, as well as their physical spaces, “communicate[d] [about] what they believe[d] about the person of Jesus Christ.” Throughout her courses, Elizabeth emphasized the centrality of her students knowing who they were and what they believed before they decided how they should behave.

Felix

Felix viewed his *raison d’être* in teaching as the formation of ministerial leaders. Before becoming a professor, Felix served as a youth minister for over two decades at the same church. After retiring from this position, he began supervising all the ministry leaders (e.g., small-group leaders and directors of children’s ministry) at this same church for several years. He then received a phone call from a local seminary’s dean, who asked him to manage a large grant from
a prestigious philanthropic organization to develop a youth ministry program at this seminary. Accepting this position meant that he would need to earn a doctoral degree in this area, which he completed late in middle age. Felix’s experience in forming youth ministers as a church leader drove his objectives for students enrolled in his courses.

To form effective youth ministers, Felix used a case study method in which students presented cases from their ministry contexts, then dialogued with one another about crafting theological rationales for issues presented in these cases. As he explained during his interview, Felix asked students, “‘How does Bible theology and ethics relate to this subject? … What do you think applies? … What scripture might impact this? What might be a relevant scripture theological idea here?’” In analyzing cases in this manner, students became equipped to connect their seminary education with their ministerial contexts. Felix wanted students to look to Scripture and theology to guide their ministerial decisions. As he explained later during the interview, “My whole presentation of the purpose for the course … we are teaching you Biblical truth … to see how that applies to real-life situations…. Theological reflection needs to be part of your problem solving in church.” Felix underscored the centrality of the theological basis for ministerial decisions by presenting cases that followed the same framework required of students presenting cases that he used when discussing significant decisions with his church’s board. As he stated during his interview, “At my church I’m at now … I have two times in major situations where I used that exact framework with the board. So, two of my case studies are written up exactly like I presented it to the board. So, I think that gives them a feel that this is not just academic; this is church leadership.” Felix repeatedly emphasized that the training he gave students was intended to be carried over to their future ministerial contexts and was designed to help them serve God’s people faithfully in a God-honoring manner.
George

George worked for many years in the public sector, dialoguing with other public sector representatives and employees in his own and other nations’ governments. Perhaps as a result of his experiences in the public sector, he keenly was aware of the importance of protocol and knowledge of the person or people with whom he was discoursing. His sensitivity to protocol’s role, combined with his religious beliefs, seemed to influence his view of the Bible as the central guidebook for responding to and initiating all practices in missions. As he explained during his interview, “So, basically the Bible is at the very center…. You have got to have Biblical theology drive missiology. In other words, anthropology has to be put at the service of Biblical theology.” He became increasingly concerned that anthropological authors were deemed more authoritative than biblical theologians after hearing a conference speaker remark, “You have to get into all the theological stuff before you can get back to the fun stuff … the fun stuff being anthropology.” While George acknowledged the fascinating cultural and linguistic details that anthropologists discussed, he repeatedly emphasized that Biblical theology should be viewed as the definitive influence on missional practices.

His experience in the public sector also seemed to influence his preference for communicating with individuals, as opposed to crafting messages for mass consumption by unknown people. When asked about his overall experience teaching online during his interview, George commented, “Basically, I don't like teaching online at all…. The kind of situation I really enjoy is interacting … what I’m doing with you now [responding to questions during a videoconference]. I really enjoy this kind of thing.” As a highly skilled public sector employee, he had been trained, it seems, to be sensitive to the context of the individuals with whom he was interacting, and such sensitivity was difficult to replicate in online courses configured prior to
conversing with future students. Although George disliked online courses’ impersonal nature, he nonetheless encouraged others to engage in this instructional form and appreciated the times when he was able to meet his distance students on the residential campus. As he noted during his interview, “I think it [teaching online] is worth doing … even though you are not going to be seeing the people and not doing it the way you do it in the classroom; that is worthwhile.” George apparently realized that even though he could not interact with his residential and online students in the same way, many online students could benefit from his course materials and that the ones who did were worth the risk of communicating in a less-than-ideal fashion with all students enrolled in his online courses. During his individual interview, he specifically noted students who had benefitted from email discussions, as well as his online videos: “He [a student deployed in the Middle East] was asking me … about Islam and how to interact with the Muslims … and … he found what I said very helpful…. We had quite a lot of in-depth email exchanges.” Likewise, a student who had benefitted from his online videos approached him at graduation and, as he noted during his interview, thanked him for his work as an online instructor: “A woman graduated, and she came up to me and she said my husband told me I should tell you how helpful your class was, and how … basically what a help I had been to her.” George seemed sufficiently flexible and discerning to realize that although online courses were not identical to residential courses, especially given the somewhat-limited relationships developed with online students compared with residential students, such online courses, nonetheless, could benefit students, many of whom he would never meet face-to-face.

Howard

Before becoming an instructor, Howard trained young missionaries in foreign countries and seemed to view his role at the seminary as being like that of his work with these young
missionaries in preparing students for service in their future vocational settings. Throughout his interview, Howard emphasized that he wanted his instruction to extend beyond the classroom and into his students’ ministerial and missional practices. As he explained during his interview, “I really see what we do here as equipping students for the thing that God has called them to do.”

Howard wanted his students to apply the knowledge and skills that they developed during his courses to their own ministry contexts and viewed his teaching as a form of missionary activity, in that he was preparing others for the mission field in a formal educational setting. Howard commented during his interview, “I'm only here because I really believe that what we do here through our seminary amplifies what can be done on the mission field.”

Because he viewed knowledge application in future ministerial or missional settings of primary importance, he voiced frustration during his interview with students who seemed unwilling to apply their knowledge, but simply wanted “to get the grade, the class out of the way … check the box and move on.” Likewise, he encouraged students to develop networks with other students through social media platforms and similar digital media, thereby allowing them to reflect theologically on their ministry settings beyond the duration of his course and their seminary education. During his interview, he explained that he wanted online students to replicate the experiences of residential students who have a “conversation [that] starts in the classroom … and students are able to take that outside the classroom” into physical spaces around campus by creating online communities through “Google Chat, Skype, Facebook messenger, or something like that … even email … so … that it is possible to connect with a small group of people from this class once the class is over.” Therefore, Howard wanted his instruction to impact his students’ not only in ministry and missional practices, but also to provide students with the resources necessary to reflect theologically on these practices during
and after seminary. Howard’s experiences in training missionaries prior to entering higher education seemed to orient him toward the crucial importance of his instruction’s long-term impact on his students’ future vocational settings.

**Isaac**

Prior to teaching at the college and seminary level, Isaac served as a music educator for middle and high school students at a private, Christian school, as well as a worship leader in local churches. Because he needed to teach others about prayer, praise, and worship, he began to realize that he needed further training in the theology of worship. Therefore, he enrolled in the seminary where he now teaches, having completed master’s and doctoral degrees. Therefore, enrolling in seminary to become credentialed as a ministry of worship leader was a result of the circumstances in which he found himself while educating middle and high school students. As Isaac explained during his interview, “I never saw myself pursuing ministry until I found that it was crucial to my identity and followed a path of very much integrating academics and music in Christian faith.” Learning more about the theological grounding for worship became part of his identity while serving at the private Christian school, “a place that valued integration of faith and learning,” as he explained during the same interview. This required him to teach his students about prayer, as well as corporate and individual worship. Only when Isaac was required to explain to others how to pray and praise God did he begin to fully realize the importance of anchoring these practices in Biblical and theological principles.

Because his experiences with middle and high school students, as well as local congregations, had taught him the importance of articulating worship practices’ theological underpinnings, he wanted his students to develop solid theological moorings for their worship practices. Therefore, he helped his students reflect theologically on their worship practices by
writing theology-of-worship statements, as well as analyzing models of public prayers steeped in theological concepts that communicated the nature of prayer as not only supplications to a creator, but also praise of this same Creator. To help students theologically reflect on the nature of prayer, Isaac used prayers from prior eras as conversation pieces on online discussion boards. As he commented during his interview, “One assignment that I regularly use is an interaction with a … collection of … rich doctrinal prayers infused with scripture, scriptural language, and allusions … historic prayers from the 16th century … to the … 20th century.” These prayers provided a contrast to some of the more informal prayers with which many of the worship leaders in his online classes were familiar, thereby providing a basis for considering some of the less-obvious theological concepts undergirding prayer. To help his students articulate the theological issues surrounding a robust theological understanding of their worship practices, Isaac also had his students write a theology-of-worship statement intended for use with local congregations that presented the theological principles guiding their worship practices. As he commented during his interview, he was “trying to boil down Biblical teaching, theological principles, historical practices in the Church to something that can apply in the local context.”

**John**

Before becoming an instructor, John served as a minister in the U.S. for several years, then later as an international missionary for another several years. Between the times when he served as a minister and a missionary, he and his wife obtained training from the seminary where he now teaches. While serving as a missionary, John began to discern areas where he and the missionaries with whom he was working could benefit from better understanding and training. Consequently, he and his family returned to the U.S. so that he could pursue more advanced education at the same seminary where he was employed at the time of this research. After
completing his doctoral degree at his employing institution, he began to teach courses for missionaries and ministers, and through these courses, he sought to provide students with the knowledge and abilities that he felt would have helped him better serve those to whom he ministered as a missionary. As John explained during his interview, he developed classes by drawing on, “my experience being particularly a cross-cultural missionary overseas of trying to think of what would … what did I want and what would I want … being somewhere else and ministering.”

John wanted his students to have the resources necessary to evaluate missionary and ministerial practices using biblical and theological standards, as opposed to basing pastoral and missional decisions merely on measurable outcomes. As John commented during his interview, he wanted his students to ask questions that probed their decisions’ theological underpinnings, such as, “Are we making sure we haven’t just said … ‘Is this working?’ … But why are we doing this? Is this right? What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor?” Providing active missionaries and ministers with these tools to evaluate their ministry according to spiritual, rather than secular, standards caused John to appreciate the opportunities offered by the online venue for theological education. As he noted during his interview, “What I have enjoyed … is for the most part the students that I have…. They are practitioners.” Considering that they are practitioners, John felt that he could be “teaching for the people beyond them … young believers, not quite yet believers, new churches, and existing churches.” In other words, John felt that his work as an online instructor allowed him to influence not only his online students, most of whom were serving as missionaries or ministers, but also the individuals within their communities. The ability to extend his influence beyond the individuals in his classroom, as he commented during his interview, originally led to him teaching in the seminary, as he and his
family viewed the seminary as an “opportunity to perhaps instead of just our family being somewhere, perhaps raise up, and mobilize, and train hundreds of people to do what we were doing [in the mission field].” Consequently, the online environment helped John fulfill his original calling to instruct others in the seminary community.

**Karl**

Prior to becoming an instructor, Karl served as a minister for over five decades, and throughout this time as a pastor, he remained involved in missions as an administrator. Moreover, while moving between churches, he once served as a fundraiser for a mission organization, then later earned a doctoral degree in missions. His sincere interest in and concern for a theological grounding for missional practices seemed to influence his teaching, in which he wanted students to be fully aware of the embodied theologies they were expressing when ministering to others. For instance, during his individual interview, he explained, “The purpose of theological reflection is to … look at mission practices and … to understand, ‘What are the theologies that are operative? … Does the practice … square up with the theological ideal that’s being articulated?’” Therefore, Karl felt strongly that his students should demonstrate their professed theological beliefs in their actions to those whom they were serving.

Additionally, Karl noted the positive influence of his institution’s online initiative, which sought to merge residential and distance education courses. His school chose not to create prerecorded lectures shared with distance students, but asked students, in many classes, to join on-campus students through videoconferencing technology. Karl viewed this as helpful for other students, who could learn from students with whom they might not otherwise be able to attend seminary. For instance, in one course, as he explained during his interview, he had a student “from India [who] had served as a pastor there, and so I invited him to take about half the
morning and to talk about his … perspective on the Indian context.” Without digital
technologies, such enrichment would be difficult to share, as students necessarily were limited to
hearing their peers’ views in either residential or online course sections. However, Karl noted
that his institution had invested heavily in the hardware and personnel necessary to create these
experiences for students. As he commented during his interview, “I am very aware that many
other people have created the structure, the environment within which it’s possible for that to be
a positive experience. It really is a team effort.” Administrators, student assistants, online
directors, and equipment were necessary to help Karl and his students benefit from the blended
residential and online campuses that easily could have thwarted, rather than enriched, the
professors and students’ educational experiences at his seminary.

Luke

After serving as a missionary for nearly two decades, Luke began instructing students at
the seminary where he was employed. Luke’s experience in other countries with people who
were English Language Learners (ELLs) was apparent throughout his interview, during which he
spoke of the special challenges and benefits he perceived for online students whose primary
language was something other than English. For example, Luke noted that ELLs seemed to
benefit from the additional time afforded by asynchronous assignments that allowed them to
formulate their comments more carefully than during a classroom discussion. As he stated during
his interview, “An asynchronous online experience allows them [ELLs] more opportunity to
reflect and to articulate better what they want to say…. The speed of interaction mitigates against
those that English is a second language.” He further explained that this extra time helped not
only those who are ELLs, but also students who may have been helped by having the extra time
to find specific quotations from scripture to support their views. As he commented later during
his interview, “If a verse comes to mind, they don’t remember where it’s at, they can flip through the Bible. It gives them that opportunity in time.” Therefore, the benefit of additional time to formulate remarks assisted students who were learning English, as well as those who were more comfortable with flexible time allotments for written assignments and conversations.

Luke also noted the challenges posed for international students, who may not have fully understood the meaning of a word that they used during a written discussion. Specifically, he stated during his interview that for students who spoke “English as a second language ... it may be that they are typing things that they really don’t mean ... a miscommunication.” Despite the difficulties that ELLs encountered, Luke viewed their participation in online education as enriching for students who were native English speakers. The ELL speakers, many of whom were serving or had served in an international setting, often added cultural diversity to the discussions, broadening the perspectives of those who had been raised in North America. For example, Luke explained during his interview that his students’ understanding of private, devotional times had been widened by students who had lived in populous areas of Asia and rarely found themselves in a quiet area without other people. These students have lived “in a city of 10 or 20 million ... when ... ‘quiet time’ comes up, they have never lived ... where there’s ... quiet ... that is a benefit ... others [are] able to hear these ... situations.” Luke viewed these additional perspectives from those in non-Western settings as one of the primary advantages of including such students in online classrooms.

In addition to serving as a missionary, Luke also served as a minister for several years prior to being employed as an instructor. His experiences working as a minister seemed to influence his views on theological reflection as being a necessary aspect of spiritual formation. In his letter, Luke wrote that he viewed theological reflection as a necessary bridge between
theological understanding and application: “Theology and practicality are fundamentally intertwined, but it takes theological reflection in order to help with the connections and unpacking what it means. Ministry and the Christian life are foundationally truncated without theological reflection.” Luke felt that only by articulating theological doctrines’ impact through theological reflection could Christians meaningfully embody the beliefs that they professed. Luke also maintained that prayer was an effective means of allowing for the spiritual growth required for theological reflection that could impact the hearts, minds, and lives of his students. As he commented during his interview, assignments involving theological reflection ideally should include instructions that required space for prayer on the texts assigned: “Think about this. Pray about it. What did you learn from that? … A prayer retreat would be perfect for those kind of engagement times.” To help students appreciate theological reflection’s spiritual aspect, Luke drew on historical figures who used theological reflection to examine their lives. During his interview, he explained that he provided students with samples from his “personal devotional reading,” such as “Bonhoeffer … Saint Bernard of Clairvaux … [and] Theresa of Avila…. It helps me move … from a … cognitive academic process to … spiritual development.” Therefore, Luke viewed theological reflection as essential for the personal formation of future missionaries and ministers.

Matthew

Matthew, who had been working as a professor for over a decade, began teaching shortly after earning one of his graduate degrees at an institution other than the one where he was now employed and where he resisted the establishment of an online education program primarily because he felt that the institution was not investing adequately in the program, but simply using the program as a way to increase revenue. After serving at this institution, he began to take
courses, some of which were online, at the seminary where he now teaches and wholeheartedly supported the online program, as he felt that the school was truly seeking to align its values and the students’ needs through distance education. Matthew, who also served as his seminary’s online director, appreciated online education because he felt that this form of distance education allowed for a broad range of students to participate. For example, during his interview, he related experiences that included a student who had been one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, the “group of people who had traveled across the whole country as kids trying to escape persecution and ... listening to someone talk about the Gospel in this context was just amazing,” as well as students in Nigeria, who reviewed course materials together, then met with him to ask questions and articulate their responses to the issues they had discovered in the lectures and readings. Therefore, Matthew encouraged online education that was aligned to institutional values and was supported adequately to allow for meaningful conversations, such as those he experienced with students.

Furthermore, Matthew valued online courses in theological reflection, as he viewed them as a means of providing students with opportunities to ground their pastoral and personal practices in scripture. For instance, Matthew helped his students link scriptural verses with their ministries and lives by talking with them about the connections between specific verses and either church or daily life practices. During his interview, he used an example from a recent videoconference, in which his students had been reviewing texts related to the resurrection narrative. He then helped them connect these verses to liturgical practices, such as baptism, as well as life practices in which Christians express their faith. As he explained during his interview, in this synchronous discussion group, students linked “1 John 3 and … Romans 6 to baptism … the Resurrection … the Christian life … [and] the newness of life that Paul talks about
... because of the resurrection.” Matthew clearly wanted his students to understand the intricate relationship between theological themes found in scripture and how they interacted with others within and without the church. Moreover, in his letter of advice, Matthew recommended explaining to students that their time in seminary should include “growing in knowledge and skill … in their relationship to God, [and] … in [their] … character.” In other words, Matthew held that the theology and academic materials with which instructors provided students were meant for spiritual, as well as academic and pastoral, formation. Furthermore, he maintained that asynchronous discussion boards could be used to help form students spiritually, as additional time often afforded by text-mediated discussions allowed students to reflect at a deeper level on course materials and, thus, discuss topics that they may not have encountered in more rapid, synchronous discussions. As he commented during his interview, discussion boards provided his students, as well as himself, with the opportunity to “talk about things that we wouldn’t … necessarily have talked about if it was a live discussion because the separation of when we could read the thing versus when we could respond … allowed for depth of reflection.” Consequently, Matthew found that both synchronous and asynchronous online assignments allowed him to help students interweave their theological beliefs with their behaviors in ministerial and non-ministerial settings.

These 13 participants provided rich data during their individual and group interviews, as well as their letters of advice, allowing me to discern individual and collective structures (i.e., the how) and textures (i.e., the what) of the experience of teaching theological reflection online (Moustakas, 1994). The next sections discuss the overarching themes in their responses, as well as the answers to my research questions.
Results

Data from these 13 participants, in the form of individual and group interview transcripts combined with written letters of advice to future theological educators, were analyzed through descriptive phenomenological analysis as described by Moustakas (1994). This analysis yielded the themes of time, relationships, experience, and space, as well as answers to the research questions addressed by this study concerning the content, context, benefits, and challenges associated with teaching theological reflection online. Finally, the structural elements of time, relationships, and space were synthesized with the texture of conversations about experience and theology to yield the essence of teaching theological reflection online that centered around hospitality for the purpose of cultivating conversations that linked experience with theology.

Theme Development

As outlined in Chapter Three, I developed themes through descriptive phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) that included epoché, the setting aside of my own views and biases prior to considering the data; horizonalization, the equal consideration of all comments made by instructors to reveal the texture or details of what comprises teaching theological reflection online; imaginative variation, viewing instructors’ statements from a variety of perspectives to understand how teaching theological reflection online occurs (i.e., to discern the structures necessary for teaching theological reflection online); and synthesis of the textural and structural components of teaching theological reflection online to distill the essence of this experience.

After following the steps outlined above for descriptive phenomenological analysis, four primary themes arose from the data: time; relationships; experience; and space (Table 3). The theme of time included comments from professors regarding the difficulties encountered in devoting enough time to develop and maintain online courses, given their prior work experiences
in ministry, as well as their perceptions of teaching online. Instructors also discussed the challenges that students seemed to experience in completing course assignments due to their personal and professional obligations and the superficiality that at times characterized online assignments, given online communications’ efficiency. Despite the challenges of allotting enough time to online teaching and learning, instructors remarked on the benefits that they derived from teaching online, which included having more time to consider remarks prior to responding to students; strategically using time delays, such as pauses in videos, to facilitate learning; and the ability to provide repeated occasions for theological reflection. Students also seemed to benefit from the extra time afforded in the online environment, as they were able to acquire the self-discipline necessary to schedule coursework around their other responsibilities and formulate their thoughts more accurately if they preferred a slower learning pace or were English Language Learners.

The theme of relationships similarly included advantages and disadvantages associated with learning about and teaching theological reflection online. Professors remarked on the weirdness of the relationships between themselves and their students, especially when they encountered online students at unexpected times on the residential campus. To overcome the inherent awkwardness of computer-mediated relationships, instructors noted the necessity of bridging the online divide through personalized communications and one-on-one interactions with students. Despite the necessity of purposefully connecting across cyberspace, instructors enjoyed seeing students grow through their educational opportunities and often discovered ways to improve their teaching by considering students’ comments on helpful or unhelpful aspects of their courses.
Instructors also sought to forge relationships among students despite the challenges that they encountered in creating these relationships. Professors viewed such relationships as beneficial for students who felt isolated in their ministry contexts and, therefore, would enjoy the sense of colleagueship that often developed among online students. To cultivate these relationships, instructors purposefully limited enrollment in class sections to a small number of students (e.g., six to 12 students), established confidentiality policies, and sometimes required students to enroll in consecutive academic terms with the same cohort of students, or to attend other residential classes as part of their degree programs (e.g., an orientation class at the beginning of a degree program that was held only on the residential campus and not offered online). Although professors viewed student-to-student relationships as a valuable component of online education, they noted the difficulties in fostering such relationships. For instance, online students increasingly were becoming reluctant to attend any residential courses and sometimes had difficulty coordinating their schedules to attend videoconferences with other students who lived in different time zones. Additionally, students sometimes experienced technological difficulties connecting to videoconferences and neglected to post written comments on discussion boards in a timely fashion. Even when students posted comments according to class guidelines and timetables, the conversations were somewhat stilted, given the lack of spontaneity in text-mediated discussions occurring over several days. Thus, relationships among students were valuable, but challenging to develop and maintain in the online environment.

Instructors not only discussed relationships between themselves and students, as well as those between students, but also discussed their relationships with other instructors at their employing institutions and other institutions, their relationships with on-site mentors, and their students’ relationship with the divine. Professors’ colleagues at their home institutions often
helped them overcome some of the technological challenges associated with the online environment, while instructors at other institutions frequently gave them new ideas concerning either technology or theological reflection to incorporate into their existing online courses. Conversely, on-site mentors often helped students develop their ministerial abilities or fluency in theological reflection. Finally, professors sought to help students develop spiritually by having them integrate prayer into their reflections and by having them theologically reflect on everyday experiences and their vocational identity or ministerial calling. Consequently, the network of relationships that created the context of the online classroom comprised a sociogram that extended beyond the online classroom to include other instructors, on-site mentors, and the divine.

While relationships formed one of the structures of teaching theological reflection online, the texture of these relationships centered around the theme of conversations about past, present, and future experiences from a wide range of ministry contexts. Professors often drew on their own ministerial experiences when linking topics in class discussions to theological concepts or challenging ministry issues, but also encouraged students to consider case studies from others’ ministry experiences, written biographies of those in ministry or missions, as well as their own prior experiences. Professors also sometimes allowed students to consider future ministry experiences (e.g., the ministry positions that they hoped to obtain after completing their seminary education). However, the most common sources for theological reflection were students’ current ministry contexts, which were in a vast array of geographical locations and ministry settings, given online education’s ability to connect students and professors across thousands of miles. Students’ diverse ministry contexts often enriched online conversations’ texture and were viewed by professors as one of the primary benefits of online education. These ministry experiences then
were linked to and examined with theological principles to help students express their beliefs in their ministerial decisions and actions.

The final theme emerging from the instructors’ comments concerned the virtual space in which they helped others learn about theological reflection. Professors commented on the challenge of differentiating this educational space from other commonly encountered virtual spaces, such as social media sites, given the somewhat thoughtless or abrasive comments that appeared on these sites, and at times in the online classroom. Instructors frequently referenced policies on netiquette to communicate discourse standards for their online classrooms clearly to students. They also sometimes spoke with students privately through email messages, phone calls, or video chats to discuss appropriate online behavior or simply to strengthen their relationship with distance students. In addition to distinguishing the online classroom from popular social media sites, instructors also spoke about the digital trace left by online lectures or text-mediated discussions (e.g., discussion boards), which contrasted with the more fleeting nature of residential lectures or classroom conversations. Finally, instructors commented on the continually changing content within their online courses and the ever-changing contexts in which their students were ensconced. Therefore, the online educational space was challenging to separate from other online spaces encountered by students (e.g., Facebook or Twitter) and was changing continually, given developments in course materials and ministry contexts.

Table 3
Themes and Sub-Themes (Codes)

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes (Codes)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>Professors: Challenge to prepare and maintain courses</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Students: Struggle to complete assignments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professors and students benefit from extra time to consider course materials</td>
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</tbody>
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| Relationships                          | Between professors and students
|                                      | Among students               |
|                                      | Between professors and their colleagues |
|                                      | Between professors, students, and mentors |
|                                      | Students’ relationship with God |
| Experience                           | Past                          |
|                                      | Present                       |
|                                      | Future                        |
|                                      | Link experience with theology |
| Diverse Contexts of Students         | Continually changing spaces |
|                                      | The Facebook effect           |
|                                      | Digital artifacts             |
|                                      | Netiquette policies to create a safe space |
|                                      | Private spaces for conversations between professors and students |

**Time**

Courses involving online theological reflection comprised challenges, as well as benefits, for both instructors and students. Instructors often struggled to devote enough time to create and maintain online courses, especially given their perceptions of online teaching and prior work experiences. Students, likewise, had difficulties structuring their schedules to attend to course assignments, given their personal and professional responsibilities, as well as the value that they perceived from online education and the distraction of online communications, which often resulted in somewhat-superficial remarks. Nonetheless, these online platforms contained many benefits, such as allotting instructors the time necessary to respond to complicated questions, the opportunity to use time delays to help students engage with course materials in a thoughtful manner, and the option of requiring students to disengage from technology for short periods of time as part of reflective assignments. Students also derived benefits from online platforms, such as having the opportunity to develop the self-discipline necessary to complete coursework alongside their other responsibilities, providing them with the space to comment through written
discussions, even if they were English Language Learners or temperamentally shy. Therefore, online instruction was different, given the “weirdness of time” in the online environment, as noted by Matthew during his interview, but nevertheless beneficial.

**Professors: Challenge of time to prepare and maintain courses.** Professors noted that they often struggled to schedule the necessary time to create and maintain course materials. For example, structuring their schedules to prepare, prior to the beginning of an academic term, clear instructions for assignment expectations sometimes was challenging. Isaac, in his letter of advice, recommended giving “clear instructions,” and Howard, during a group interview, agreed that such instructions were needed, noting, “[One of ] the … things that seem[s] to make the biggest difference in the quality of the online theological reflection is when I clearly explain expectations.” However, drafting these clear instructions required additional time, as John explained during his interview: “I think teaching online -- at least for me -- has forced me to probably spend a little bit more time at points in preparation and consideration so that I can communicate more clearly and concisely.” Considering how students would respond to instructions and modifying them until they seemed appropriate for students were both necessary and time-consuming tasks for instructors.

Instructors also commented on the need to structure their schedules to devote enough time not only for drafting assignment instructions that were easy to understand; they also noted the significant amount of time they devoted to preparing other course materials, such as online course platforms and video lectures. Alistair, during a group interview, explained that he could not simply insert relevant information as time progressed across the semester and as the need arose, but needed to place all relevant materials online before meeting students at the beginning of the academic term. In “the live classroom … I have the knowledge and experiences of my
whole life to pull from at a moment’s notice…. Online, … I have to put it all into the module where the student can experience it.” Likewise, George, during his interview, commented on the amount of time required to create video lectures and associated materials, such as lecture notes for online students: “It was [time consuming]…. I went through all the lectures, and I pulled all those words and phrases I had written on the board [that were illegible in videos] and wrote them on what I call thumbnail notes.” Matthew, during his interview, reiterated the investment of time required by individual instructors, as well as media staff, to prepare such video lectures for students: “Once you have recorded …, edited the lecture, added graphics, added caption[s], gone through … post-production stuff, … uploaded it to the Internet, … you’ve put in the work hours of at least four other people on our team.” Consequently, structuring their time and that of affiliated staff, such as media personnel, was a challenge for many of the professors.

Additionally, maintaining courses and interacting with students, after the start of an academic term, required much of the professors’ time. Cameron, during his individual interview, explained that he needed to monitor multiple channels of communication (e.g., both email and phone messages) to create a meaningful online presence with students: “It is important to respond to people as quickly as possible in their questions … have a couple ways for people to get a hold of me…. That's crucial … reviewing what is going on online regularly.” With larger classes, such interactions, as Matthew stated during his interview, could become somewhat onerous: “One of my co-workers and I once led a spiritual formation class online…. We had trouble keeping up with the whole large group.” The interaction speed required, the number of platforms through which students could contact instructors, and class size contributed to the significant investment of time required by online professors. Moreover, the time required for such communications with students was increased by the necessity of making such interactions
personal for individual students. Ben, in his letter of advice, noted the necessity of teaching in such a way as to create a connection with each student by urging “future teachers [to] instruct theological reflection personally” and noted during his interview the time required to create individualized responses for each student: “Personal things … [with] a grade, … [in the] space for notes … mention something…. ‘You like college football? I do too…. That game last week – wasn't that something?’ … Very time consuming or time investing.” Instructors, like those quoted above, commented again and again on the challenge of reserving enough time to maintain course materials properly to give students a meaningful educational experience.

**Professors: Challenge of contrast with other work experiences and expectations of online teaching.** Instructors explained that the time required to prepare materials for the entire academic term, prior to meeting students, contrasted sharply with their prior experiences as pastors and residential teachers, as well as their expectations of teaching online. Karl, who had served as a congregational minister for over five decades, explained, during his individual interview, that preparing materials for several months of teaching differed drastically from his experience as a minister: “This Canvas [Learning Management System] platform … enforces a level of discipline…. I would tend to wing it at the last minute…. It’s a different rhythm for a pastor to be in a congregation.” Similarly, John, during his interview, remarked that residential teaching required less advance preparation concerning details about assignments and course materials because “online, you have got a certain amount of time [for] preparing things…. In person, … you can kind of talk around things a little bit more.” Online teaching differed not only from instructors’ prior work experiences in ministry and residential teaching, but also from their expectations concerning the time required to create materials. John, during his interview, noted that many people viewed online teaching as easier than residential teaching: “In many ways,
more time and effort [are needed] online, and to be honest, that’s not typically, that’s not what people think when they think about online education.” Alistair, during his individual interview, explained that he thought teaching online was going to be “so simple,” then reaffirmed during a group interview: “My simplistic thought was, ‘How easy can online be?’” but then realized, after starting to teach online, “The challenge is anticipating those experiences in order for students to engage with the full force of what you need to communicate.” Therefore, instructors were surprised by the time commitment required for online teaching, especially the time required prior to meeting students, as their expectations and prior experiences in ministry and brick-and-mortar classrooms required significantly less advance planning for interacting with those to whom they ministered or those whom they instructed residentially.

**Students: Struggle to make time due to personal and professional obligations.**

Instructors felt that students frequently struggled to make time for their studies due to personal or professional demands, misunderstanding the amount of time seminary coursework would require, and disregarding education’s value. During her individual interview, Elizabeth noted that students sometimes were in “full-time work, so it is hard for them to find the time to do it and get to it regularly … [and] they don't gain the value of it…. Usually, they are over busy.” Matthew, during his individual interview also noted that students had personal responsibilities, such as “their families,” in addition to “their careers, … [and] their ministries … [so] they’re already feeling full up.” Luke, during a group interview, commented that many students were engaged in both secular and pastoral work, in addition to their academic pursuits, so they are “bi-vocational ministers…. Their full-time job is … [with] the highway department…. On the nights and weekends, they are in ministry…. They are trying to do the online courses…. It is … a three-headed monster.” In addition to these duties to their families and their employers, which often
negatively impacted the time online students could devote to their studies, some students, who had been in the workplace, rather than the classroom, for several years often did not understand the amount of time that they would need to schedule to benefit from online learning opportunities. Alistair, during a group interview, described one of his recent students, who “is a little bit older and has been in the workplace for several years and out of the education world…. He overestimated the size of his course load and bit off a little more than he can chew.” Consequently, the contrast between the time students thought that they needed to devote to their assignments and the time that they needed to devote to their studies, as well as the numerous demands on their time, created difficulties for them in structuring their schedules to devote enough time to their studies.

Not only did personal and professional duties, as well as confusion about the amount of time required for online classes, impede deep engagement with coursework, but an undervaluing of academic credentials and study also sometimes hampered serious devotion to seminary classes. Three instructors – Doug, Luke, and Howard – used variations of the phrase “check the box” during their individual interviews to describe superficial engagement with course materials. Doug and Luke used the phrase “check the boxes,” and Howard used the expression, “check off some box in the world” to convey a sense of disregard for the true intent of a seminary education. Doug and Luke attributed this superficiality to a lack of time, given students’ obligations to families and careers, while Howard felt that some students viewed “education … [as] a commodity that's purchased, as opposed to an experience [of] training and equipping.” In his letter, he elaborated that such students “are not committed to learning and see online as a way to get a degree with as little interruption as possible to their lives.” This combination of lack of
time or the discipline to devote time to seminary assignments, combined with an under-valuing of seminary training, created a rather undesirable situation for many online instructors.

**Students: Challenge of distraction by technology.** Instructors also felt that students needed to overcome the urge to be online all the time, even though they were pursuing online degrees, so that they could truly engage in theological reflection. Both Luke and Isaac recommended refraining from engagement with technology as a means of developing the habit of purposefully disengaging from online platforms to focus on deep engagement with theological issues related to life and ministry. Luke, in his letter of advice, noted the need to “set aside time for theological reflection” and during his individual interview, he recommended that instructors ensure that “the efficiency of the technology does not mitigate against … genuine … theological reflection because … the efficiency of the information technology can mitigate against just the time needed for the theological reflection.” Isaac, during a group interview, reiterated the need to resist the Internet’s rapidity by “fasting from media and technology” so that “students can journal about their experiences where they are away from media and technology and … engaging simply with a printed Bible or other assigned reading.” Both Luke and Isaac gave the impression that technology should be used in moderation, even in online classes, so that theological reflection could be given the depth of consideration not always found in almost-instantaneous online communications and activities.

**Students: Acquire self-discipline if overcome the challenges.** However, professors were adamant that the students who successfully structured their lives to attend to their studies, as well as their personal and professional duties, often developed self-discipline, which would serve them well throughout their lives. Ben, during his individual interview, stated that online students, perhaps even more so than residential students, reaped the benefit of the skill of
“independent learning … a greater level of self-discipline in [the] online student. In some ways, it is harder. It is more difficult because you must take the bull by the horns yourself.” Students, indeed, felt that they benefitted from developing the skills needed to shape their schedules so that they can complete online course work successfully. As Karl explained during his individual interview, “They’re carving out space…. Many of them describe that as being beneficial … having to discipline … themselves … to do the course that … comes on screen at a certain time … to arrange their lives.” Clearly, students who rose to the challenge of scheduling their time to complete coursework acquired the skill of self-discipline, which both instructors and students viewed as valuable.

Professors: Benefit of time for consideration. Despite the challenges in scheduling time for theological reflection outlined in the above sections, instructors maintained that the delay in asynchronous platforms, such as discussion boards, provided them with additional time to develop their responses to students. Matthew, during his individual interview, contrasted residential and online teaching by explaining that the online platform gave him sufficient time to respond to somewhat-unexpected questions or comments from students: In a “residential classroom … students are expecting something pretty quick … whereas online, you have … time and space to think … [giving] a preciseness that you might not have if you’re … thinking off the top of your head.” Matthew obviously benefitted from the extra time to craft meaningful answers to students’ questions, but Alistair appreciated asynchronous communication’s suitability to his personality by describing himself, during his individual interview, as “an extreme introvert” who wants to consider his remarks before supplying them to students: “I can take my time, not having to respond in the moment. This is one of the benefits for me as an introvert…. Not having to deliver in the exact moment is a benefit in the online world.” Thus,
professors viewed the slower pace of online communications in asynchronous platforms as an advantage for both their personalities and their preferences for answering challenging questions.

**Professors: Benefit of purposeful uses of time delays.** Another aspect of the time delay in asynchronous online communications noted by instructors was the use of these delays to encourage students to pause and consider their responses or their use of technology prior to returning to the online platform. For instance, Howard, during his individual interview, explained that he encouraged students to pause his online video lectures, respond to a discussion board, then return to the online lecture: “I'll stop a lecture midstream and tell the students that I want them to go … and answer a question in a discussion board, and then come back [and] … listen to the next part of a lecture.” Howard wanted to replicate the time provided in residential courses during live discussions so that students could consider his comments in classroom lectures prior to responding: “Online is a bit more complicated because … you don’t have the opportunity to sit around the table in the classroom and discuss.” Matthew, during his interview, echoed Howard’s use of purposeful delays in video lectures: “One of the things we try to tell our distance students is to use the pause button liberally so that they can reflect.” Thus, Matthew and Howard, like other professors, viewed the ability to slow down course lectures as an advantage peculiar to the online platform. Instructors who noted the challenge of technology as a distraction in structuring adequate time for reflection also sought to use such delays to inculcate the habit of disengaging from technology to allow for meaningful theological reflection. As Luke commented during a focus group, “A technology sabbath or something of this sort to engender [a] time of theological reflection and, of course, prayer” could help teach students the spiritual disciplines necessary to engage effectively in theological reflection.
Professors: Provide repeated opportunities for reflection. Finally, instructors noted the need to structure courses so that theological reflection could be completed numerous times throughout the course to develop the habit of reflection. John, who served as a missionary in the Middle East, wrote in his letter of advice that a “favorite Arabic proverb of mine loosely translates, ‘Repetition teaches donkeys.’ Continued theological reflection in an applied area like missions takes repeated emphasis and discipline.” Elizabeth, during a focus group, similarly remarked that students “are required to do 12 of them over the course of the academic year to … develop the habit of reflecting theologically on their ministry and ministerial settings…. The regularity of them is … important,” and Doug echoed this sentiment in another focus group when remarking that reflection should be a “continual repeated process.” Thus, instructors viewed structuring times for theological reflection throughout an online course as necessary for developing the lifelong habit of considering theological moorings for pastoral decisions.

Professors wanted to inculcate this habit so that time for theological reflection could continue beyond seminary coursework for the benefit of these future religious leaders and those whom they served. Alistair, in his letter of advice, wrote, “When ministry gets messy, ministry leaders must learn to navigate relationships through effective conflict management. Understanding how … theological, theoretical, and emotional constructs affect ministry is vital to ministry success.” Ben, during his interview, explained that theological reflection not only could benefit ministers, but also could help their congregants make wise decisions and grow spiritually, such as a “conflict over the budget … to ask … what are the theological issues … to ask … about the presence of God in … their lives … to equip them to do that with their parishioners.” Such continued reflection beyond seminary was necessary not only for the well-being of pastors and those whom they serve, but also to ensure that congregations and their
pastors’ current theologies were being applied to ministry and life settings. As Luke commented during his individual interview, “Theological reflection … cannot be a static…. Rather, it’s part of an ongoing process … [and] will probably look different this year than next year because we’re at a different place in our maturity.” Consequently, repeated reflection during seminary training was designed to inculcate the habit of routinely considering issues from a theological perspective so that the religious leader and those whom they served could continue this practice throughout their lives as a community, together, thereby making decisions in a manner that best suited their current theological perspectives. Thus, instructors viewed the online platform, especially asynchronous elements, as a means of allowing for pauses that could teach the skills and content necessary for quality reflection.

**Students: Benefit for those who preferred a slower style of learning or who were English Language Learners (ELLs).** Instructors also felt that students benefitted from the extra time due to their learning styles or personalities as well as their familiarity with English. Matthew, during his interview, commented that some students replied quickly to live questions due to their learning styles, while others struggled to formulate their comments: “Some of them [the students] are verbal processors…. You ask a question, they’re very quick on it…. Other people are quieter … they’re chewing on it…. Students [have] complained [in] live classes that things moved too fast.” Along with learning styles, personalities also seemed to influence advantages that students derived from the online platform. Cameron, during his interview, explained that students who were prone to being reticent in residential class discussions were required to comment through online platforms: “In our living classes, kids will just sit there and if they are introverts … they'll never say something…. I’ve gotten some really excellent responses … that’s a better reaction than a normal class situation.” In addition to helping shy
students, asynchronous discussions also allowed those who were English Language Learners to take the time they needed to formulate their thoughts. As Luke commented during his interview, “An asynchronous online experience allows them more opportunity … to articulate better what they want to say … [in] a chat room…. The speed of interaction mitigates against those that [speak] English as a second language.” Regardless of English proficiency or personality styles, instructors agreed that the extra time was beneficial for all students, given the necessity of devoting adequate time to reflection and finding relevant references to support the reflection. As Ben commented in his letter of advice, “The extra time invested in carefully looking beneath the presenting issues for the real issues will undoubtedly support the ultimate goals of theological reflection.” As Luke elaborated during his interview, “If a verse comes to mind [and] they don’t remember where it’s at, they can flip through the Bible. It gives them that opportunity in time.” Therefore, the extra time granted by asynchronous assignments was a benefit for both students and instructors afforded by the online platform.

In summary, the online environment required instructors to intentionally devote adequate time to preparing and maintaining course materials and, likewise, required that students structure their schedules to invest enough time in their online learning despite their personal and professional responsibilities. Nonetheless, instructors benefitted from the additional time to consider replies to somewhat-unexpected student comments, as well as the ability to use time strategically for educational purposes, and students benefitted from the additional time to consider their comments in written discussions if they were somewhat shy or English Language Learners.
Relationships

The principal relationships mentioned by instructors were those between professors and students, students and their peers, professors and their colleagues, students and their mentors, and students and their god. The relationships between professors and students were sometimes awkward (e.g., when online students encountered their professors on the residential campus) and, therefore, required cultivation through personalized communication. Nonetheless, these relationships benefitted professors who were able to witness students’ growth and discipline in their studies, as well as those who were able to receive ideas to improve their teaching in future classes. Likewise, relationships among students were beneficial in that students experienced a sense of camaraderie with their peers and often were encouraged to develop and grow by their classmates. Moreover, instructors formed relationships with colleagues at their home institutions and other seminaries that honed their teaching abilities, as well as with mentors who helped their students within their local contexts. Finally, instructors sought to help their students develop spiritually by encouraging their relationships with the divine through reflections on their daily lives and vocations, as well as spiritual practices such as prayer.

Relationships between professors and students. The relationships between professors and students were somewhat awkward, especially when students and professors met one another unexpectedly on campus and, therefore, required personalization efforts to overcome the separation of space and time within these relationships. Nonetheless, professors benefitted from the growth and self-discipline that they perceived in many of their online students and appreciated students who gave them ideas on how to improve their courses in the future.

Weirdness of the relationships between professors and students. The awkwardness of the relationships between professors and students was highlighted when instructors unexpectedly
would meet online students on their seminaries’ physical campuses. As George explained during his individual interview, “I have run into … [some] online students…. They have watched me in the lecture…. They greet me like a long-lost friend, and it's like, ‘Who are you anyway?’ … a funny, but awkward situation.” These unplanned overlaps of the online and physical worlds seemed to surprise and disorient George, who had over a decade of experience teaching in the residential classroom. Alistair also commented on the strangeness of unexpectedly meeting an online student on the physical campus:

As I was walking into chapel, there was a guy that I thought looked vaguely familiar…. He was one of my online … students … coming to the library…. He talked about how he was enjoying the class…. For someone who is considering teaching in the online world, especially if they have taught in the live classroom, you have a lot of adjustments to make.

The awkwardness of meeting someone in physical space with whom you have interacted only in virtual space seemed to underscore the relatively recent development of such relationships and seemed to be somewhat disorienting for instructors who primarily had experience teaching in the residential classroom.

*The necessity of bridging the distance in online education.* Given online relationships’ somewhat artificial nature, instructors repeatedly emphasized the necessity of bridging the physical divide between professors and students by personalizing their interactions with students. Isaac, during his individual interview, commented, “The distance is real. [It is necessary] to minimize the sense of distance by personal interaction … [trying to] foster a real personal connection and let them know that there is a vital link and care for their development.” As revealed in his comments, Isaac attempted to personalize his interactions simply by showing his
students that he was concerned that they grow as religious leaders through their interactions with him. Ben similarly attempted to bridge the physical divide by personalizing his interactions with students. As Ben explained in his letter of advice, “I would urge that future teachers instruct theological reflection personally…. You must bridge the divide between student and teacher.”

Ben, during his individual interview, explained how he bridged this distance:

I try to pick up on those personal things…. So, I give them a grade…. [In the] space for notes … I might mention something as common as “I see you like the college football. I do too. And wasn't that game last week – your team – wasn't that something?” So, intentional but informal, making it human.

Both Isaac and Ben, like many of the other instructors, insisted that online professors create a meaningful bond between themselves and their students, given many online interactions’ detached nature.

**Bridging the online space through required residential courses.** Several professors commented that their institutions required residential courses as part of various degree programs and maintained that these courses helped create meaningful relationships between students and professors. However, at the same time, they remarked that online students were becoming increasingly resistant to such residential classes. For example, Felix explained during a group interview that his institution required online students to complete three residential courses: “We are … we are losing students because of … making them come to campus. But that week with them sure is impactful to see them face-to-face…. It just strengthens the educational experience.”

Clearly, Felix felt that the residential courses enriched the seminary experience. Although Felix did not elaborate as to why students resisted on-campus courses, Doug felt that some students
viewed residential courses as squandering resources when online interactions could serve the same purpose:

For a section of our society, of a generation, that they are doing so much of their day-to-day life on video calls and their work … it feels so normal for so many people to be on a video call now versus driving five minutes to my office…. It just seems in that demographic of 22 to 35, it is their daily life…. They almost see it as irresponsible to waste resources to travel to a place…. It rakes on their core value … of “No, why would I waste resources when I can just do a video call?” That is just as valuable to me.

Therefore, Doug attributed the reluctance to attend residential courses to the increasing prevalence of online interactions, especially videoconferences, for some age groups in our society. Despite the value of traditional courses held on campus, online students, for whatever reason, seemed reluctant to attend such courses.

**One-on-one interactions between students and professors.** Several instructors noted that they attempted to bridge the physical divide between themselves and students through synchronous conversations with individual students. As Ben commented during his individual interview, “I must deal with the impersonal dynamic. I must seek to overcome that in my instructional design, … I do try to have the conversation with each student on the telephone or through Zoom.” Ben was not the only instructor who used such synchronous, one-on-one interactions to create meaningful connections with his online students. Karl similarly required some type of private meeting with students:

I’ve begun to build into my classes a requirement that at least once during the semester, each student would schedule a one-on-one appointment with me as the instructor. So for those that are on campus, that’s usually we sit over a cup of coffee for an hour, and with
those that are distance students, we either have a private Zoom meeting or we talk on the telephone. But I’m finding that building that in as actually a requirement of the class adds a dimension of interaction, mentoring, dialogue, questions back and forth, that is really enriching, and the telephone calls with distance students are just as valuable in my experience as the face-to-face meetings with on-campus students. And I think that it personalizes the learning experience in another way that is good both for the instructor and for the students. Creates more of a connection.

Thus, for Ben, Karl, and other instructors who made similar remarks, conversations with individual students seemed to personalize online interactions’ sometimes-detached nature, thereby creating more meaningful links between instructors and their students that enriched the educational experience for both professors and students.

**Growth in students.** Once meaningful connections’ structure was established with online students, instructors benefitted from witnessing the growth they perceived in their students. For instance, Elizabeth, during her individual interview, remarked that students, who had at first disliked being a part of her required online course, eventually came to realize that the course was helpful for their ministries:

There is a benefit. I get to see the growth in students…. Some students might kind of come to it kicking and screaming, “Oh, this is a requirement. I don't want to be here.” … But what they begin to realize is this is extraordinarily valuable … [for] their lives, and the work that they are trying to do … particularly … the online students who are in the midst of ministry in various settings … and they didn’t imagine it was going to be as valuable as it has turned out to be.
Therefore, Elizabeth enjoyed seeing her students move from being resistant to having to take the course, to understanding how theological reflection helped them in their current ministry settings. Isaac also enjoyed seeing his students learn and grow through his online courses, but emphasized that the growth was perceived not in face-to-face interactions, but in written communication with the students:

You see the students really grow from the assignment … those … ‘a-ha’ moments. You don't get to see the look in the eye perhaps or … immediately experience it. But if they articulate well with these types of assignments in their writing, then that's very, very beneficial.

Thus, the development of students for Isaac, Elizabeth, and other instructors was one of the most pleasing aspects of their relationships with students.

**Self-discipline exhibited by many online students.** Not only did the growth of online students encourage and motivate instructors, but the discipline displayed by many online students similarly motivated them to continue teaching online. Ben, during his individual interview, noted that online students often had to initiate and monitor their learning in a way that differed from residential students’ experience: “The necessity for independent learning … requires a greater level of self-discipline in [the] online student. In some ways, it is harder. It is more difficult because you must take the bull by the horns yourself.” Ben felt that online students, unlike residential students, had to arrange their schedules and learning activities in a way that required more self-discipline than that required of residential students. Karl, during his individual interview, made similar remarks about the necessity of online students scheduling their coursework around their other personal and professional obligations:
Specifically, with distance students … they’ve described [that] they have to attend with greater discipline if they’re online than they would necessarily have to do if they were in the classroom…. So, they’re carving out space to focus on the course, and many of them describe that as being beneficial because of that sense of having to discipline and organize themselves in order to do the course that, you know, comes, in a sense it comes on screen [as a synchronous videoconference] at a certain time, predictable time, every week, and they have to arrange their lives to be there for that.

Clearly, Ben and Karl, like many other instructors, maintained that online students often had to exhibit initiative in a way that differed from residential students’ requirements.

Along similar lines, Howard, in his letter of advice, expressed his frustration with certain types of online students who seemed to view online as easier than residential and purposefully chose the online venue for this reason: “Those who … see online as a way to get a degree with as little interruption as possible to their lives … [they are] troublesome for your teaching, late assignments, looking for excuses and second chances.” Although some students were looking to bypass significant learning by pursuing online degrees, Howard encouraged online instructors to focus on students who wanted to invest adequate time in their studies: “Those who are interested in learning, but life circumstances prevent relocation…. Do not let [other] students cloud your perspective…. You can have great impact … if you will find ways to encourage them and lean into their education.” Obviously, the initiative and discipline exhibited by students who used their online education opportunities encouraged online instructors, such as Howard, and helped them cope with students who attempted to thwart meaningful engagement with online course materials.
**Ways to improve their courses.** Professors benefitted not only from students who used their educational opportunities well, but also from those who helped them improve their online courses. Doug, during his individual interview, commented that students influenced his teaching by the topics in which they were interested and the materials that they found helpful: “They influence me…. Like, what’s helpful for them? What’s not helpful? What kind of questions are they asking me? … What helps them really wrestle with theology and decision making, not just what they think they should do.” The reactions from Doug’s students to his online materials impacted his teaching by giving him ideas as to how to modify the course to make the materials more relevant for students and their ministry contexts. John, during his individual interview, likewise noted the bidirectional nature of his relationship with his students by highlighting the necessity of instructing students while simultaneously being instructed by them: “Students that are in classes learning from them: ‘Hey, this was really helpful. This wasn’t.’ … As an instructor, it is not just giving instruction, but can you also be instructed?” Consequently, John, like Doug and other instructors, viewed learning various methods of improving their online teaching from students as an important aspect of their relationship with students.

In summary, the relationships between instructors and students were characterized by an awkwardness that was accentuated when meeting online students on campus and that needed to be overcome purposefully through individualized interactions with students. Nonetheless, professors enjoyed witnessing students grow through their online educational opportunities and exhibit the self-discipline required of successful online students. Additionally, professors’ relationships with students allowed them to perceive ways of improving their courses based on students’ reactions to their online courses. The adjectives *awkward* and *beneficial* seem to encapsulate the experience of professors in their relationships with online students.
**Relationships among students.** Instructors sought to create relationships among students because they regarded these relationships as an essential component of the educational experience. Nonetheless, they acknowledged that creating these relationships for online students was challenging, given that students were not in the same geographical location. Instructors sought to create relational bonds between students through discussion boards, videoconferences, requiring residential classes (i.e., as part of the students’ overall degree program), and boundaries within classes concerning class size and confidentiality. After professors created these relationships, they observed that students developed rapport with one another, then helped one another grow through their educational opportunities.

**The necessity of relationships among students.** Professors maintained that relationships among students were necessary for a meaningful educational experience. As Alistair noted during a group interview, “For the online students … the relational connection … is … an integral part of the educational experience.” For Alistair, online education required interactions with peers and would be considered deficient should it not include peer-to-peer relationships. Likewise, Isaac, during his individual interview, commented on dialogue’s value with other students for online students who may at times feel a bit disconnected from ministry leaders concerned with theological issues:

> Most of them [my students] would be serving at medium to small churches part-time and … even in their own church context, they may feel rather isolated…. It really encourages them, emboldens them, let’s them know that there are others out there that value deep theology … equips them better.

Therefore, Isaac felt that relationships among students were beneficial in that they helped students feel that others were concerned with the relationship between theology and ministry.
Alistair and Isaac, like other instructors, felt that online students needed to develop relationships with one another to receive the full benefits of an educational experience.

**Challenge of creating relationships among students.** Although the instructors felt that relationships among students were necessary, they admitted that creating these relationships was challenging, given the geographical separation of students. Howard, during his individual interview, explained that residential students frequently formed bonds through their interactions on campus, which were unavailable to online students separated by time and space:

The conversation starts in the classroom, and [residential] students are able to take that outside the classroom to [the] coffee shop, to … their dorm room…. I have got an [online] student in Colorado. I have got one in Chicago. I have got one in Calcutta, India. I have got some in Brazil. I have got to figure out, “How do I help them create this coffee shop situation where they are able to get together?” … That is very difficult, but I think an important component of education…. This is one of the challenges of online education.

Howard, like others, acknowledged the difficulty of creating online situations in which online students could develop relationships with their peers that replicated the connections that residential students develop with one another.

**Discussion boards for creating relationships.** Several instructors recommended discussion boards to create relationships between students but noted the challenges that these asynchronous platforms created for developing significant connections between students. Isaac, in his letter of advice to future theological educators, suggested that professors have students “introduce themselves” so that students could “get to know others.” George, during his individual interview, similarly said that he required students, “in their first discussion,” to describe “what ministry they might have,” and Howard, during his individual interview,
commented that he asked students to “introduce themselves to the class, … [with] a video, or if … [they] need to write it up, include a picture [photo] of … [their] family or … [themselves] engaged in one of … [their] favorite hobbies.” Through these somewhat-informal exchanges, professors sought to create the semblance of a community in which online students understood with whom they were conversing.

Even though instructors recommended discussion boards as venues for fostering relationships among students, they admitted that these asynchronous platforms had significant limitations. John, during his individual interview, explained that the delay in communications between students could sometimes thwart live conversations’ spontaneity: “Theological reflection … is … conversation … give and take … that can be difficult in terms of online because it’s not synchronous … in-the-room conversation … [that] spurs other questions and other ideas.” Like John, Isaac, during his individual interview, described some of the challenges associated with text-based, time-delayed communications:

Regarding threaded discussions, it is a recurrent problem if the students in the class don't all participate if they are not in a timely manner posting what you asked them to post, reading and reflecting on these theological assignments, then no discussion can be had. There is nothing to respond to. So, if it is a small class, in particular, it has its challenges keeping the conversation going.

For both John and Isaac, as well as other instructors, the somewhat-stilted nature of conversations in discussion forums represented one of the primary disadvantages of using these platforms for fostering peer-to-peer relationships.

**Videoconferences for developing relationships among students.** Professors viewed videoconferences as helpful in fostering relationships among students, but nonetheless noted
some difficulties associated with this venue, such as technological or scheduling difficulties. Cameron, during his individual interview, clearly described a sentiment echoed by several instructors concerning the benefit of students interacting in real time through videoconferences:

Growing as a community … live participation … is crucial, … live together and be together, and that's how you grow together…. You can know their thoughts by their [written] responses, but you can’t see their reactions, and what their face looks like…. That is a very important part to being online to try to get people reacting…. You can make some of that happen by having the visual meeting … GoToMeeting, Zoom … that’s an important aspect.

According to Cameron and others, videoconferences helped foster relational bonds among students because they could see others’ nonverbal reactions in real time and, thus, develop a sense of community as an online class. Despite videoconferences’ benefits, professors described several challenges, such as scheduling live sessions across time zones for their online students. As Karl explained during his individual interview, students often had to participate in these conferences at rather peculiar times, given their geographical locations: “Depending on what time zone they live in … sometimes they’re doing it [the live videoconference] at odd hours, such as 9 [p.m.] to midnight.” Although scheduling such videoconferences could be difficult for students and instructors, Matthew noted that one instructor at his institution offered several options for the live videoconferences, which allowed students to “fiddle their schedule to fit one of [the] … multiple times.” Not only did some instructors experience difficulties accommodating students’ schedules to the live videoconference sessions, but some also had difficulty assisting students who experienced issues with the technology, thereby delaying the videoconference’s start time. As Felix commented during his individual interview:
People have trouble getting in [to the videoconference], and it can take five or 10 minutes to get everybody in the classroom. So, there are technological challenges that honestly, as a professor, you have to figure out what you are going to do. You are using up people’s valuable time while they are trying to get the technology to work.

Given that Felix’s videoconference lasted only one hour, five to 10 minutes represented a significant portion of the class time. Even though such technological issues presented challenges, Felix noted that such issues subsided as the course progressed across the academic term: “But like any class, it is a little more difficult … but especially at the beginning of a class.” Consequently, videoconferences, despite the difficulties encountered with scheduling and technology, represented one of the primary methods that instructors used to develop rapport among students.

**Residential courses to develop relationships among students.** Instructors also recommended residential courses for developing relationships among students. These residential courses were separate from the online classes and frequently were held for short time periods, such as three to five days on the seminary campuses. Professors felt that these on-campus sessions fostered relationships among students that impacted how they subsequently interacted online. As Karl explained during his individual interview:

So, there are certain courses that are offered during … [a] weekend … and [for] those courses, all students are required to be on campus…. We have some direct face-to-face contact…. It makes a huge difference in terms of having a sense of who that person is that’s on screen when they’re in the class because it’s somebody that you actually met and that you know, and vice versa. They’ve met other students, students have met them, they’ve met the instructors.
Karl, like other instructors, maintained that residential classes positively influenced the online conversations because students began to understand the individuals with whom they were communicating in cyberspace.

Despite the advantages of having online students meet one another through residential classes, instructors repeatedly emphasized the difficulties in having students attend such sessions. Karl, during a group interview, commented that the residential courses were attended by students only because they were required for degree programs: “The on-campus … courses … are required to complete the degree programs…. You cannot get the degree if you don’t show up.” During the same group interview, George remarked that he had planned on teaching an optional residential course in the recent past, but “not a single soul signed up for it…. We are finding fewer and fewer students…. At least I am … willing to do the … [residential] weekend.” Although George did not comment on the reasons why students might have been reluctant to attend on-campus courses, Matthew, during the same group interview, stated that students often felt that they could not afford the expense of traveling to and from the campus, let alone the cost of housing while on campus: “One of the hurdles … is [that] they pay housing, and car rental, and air fare if they are traveling from awhile away.” Given that cost was a deterrent for attending residential classes, Matthew was attempting to help with these costs by “working … to do at least a little bit of a scholarship to offset some of that tuition cost to make it more appealing to come to campus to see them.” Clearly, professors felt that residential classes, despite their educational value for developing connections between students, were becoming increasingly unpopular with their online students.

**Characteristics of online communities that helped foster relationships among students.** Instructors mentioned several strategies that helped create bonds between their online students,
such as small class sizes, groups of students that attended the same online courses for several academic terms, and confidentiality agreements that allowed delicate issues to be addressed. Cameron, during his individual interview, stated that he, like other professors, kept class sizes relatively small to give everyone an opportunity to participate, which he viewed as their responsibility:

The most you can have is six to eight in a meeting like that for an hour, and after six to eight, you really need, if you have 10 to 12, you really need, like, two meetings where you try to divide up so that people can participate. And once again, not hang out in the background and say, “Oh, yeah, I was there for that meeting” kind of thing, but really participate and be aware of the other students as well.

Cameron, as well as other instructors, maintained that rapport could be developed only in small groups of students and consequently restricted enrollment to a small number of students ranging from six to 12 per videoconference session. In addition to utilizing small classes, professors also had students attend courses together during subsequent semesters. For instance, Alistair remarked in his letter of advice that students at his institution were required to complete two courses on theological reflection during back-to-back academic terms:

Our seminary requires a two-semester [set of courses] … [so that a] relational bond is established. Students learn to interact with their peers … I have witnessed strong bonds of friendship and respect result from this interaction over two semesters together in class.

Likewise, other instructors noted the benefit of creating continuity and cohesion in group discussions by requiring students to attend courses as cohorts and felt that this contributed to the development of peer-to-peer relationships. Finally, professors emphasized with students that comments within group discussions were to be viewed as confidential. Isaac, during a group
interview, described a policy on confidentiality that resembled guidelines outlined by several instructors:

Seminary-level students interact about … issues in the local church. Many of them have been through difficult transitions for leadership, so I have to give a disclaimer at the beginning, where we are going to keep these stories, these anecdotes within the group … establishing those ground rules of confidentiality.

Isaac, like other professors, rightly held that students would be hesitant to discuss significant issues related to their ministry contexts if they did not feel that their comments would remain within the private group discussion. Thus, instructors used small class sizes, the same groups of students over subsequent academic terms, and rules concerning confidentiality to create settings that facilitated relational bonds between students.

**Collegueship and growth resulting from strong peer-to-peer relationships.** Once these relationships had been formed, instructors witnessed a surprising level of rapport among students, as well as opportunities for students to grow due to their interactions with their peers. Elizabeth, during a group interview, emphasized the camaraderie that she sensed among her online students:

Collegueship … is built within the group. These are folks who, over the course of nine months of communicating with one another through [a] digital format, we use video conferencing, and I’m surprised at the degree of connection they feel among one another, even though they are separated by such great distances.

This colleagueship was, for Elizabeth and other instructors, one of the primary advantages of online courses for students, and as Doug remarked during his individual interview, this sense of belonging to a group gave students “courage and comfort.” Besides strengthening students
through a sense of colleagueship, these relationships among students provided them with opportunities to help one another develop as ministerial leaders. Doug, during his individual interview, commented that he encouraged students to improve one another’s theological reflections:

The power comes from God's Word speaking into this through the theological center of this, not just chasing after the next thing. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes they just want to go through and check the boxes…. I also see when they start challenging each other. I really look for that: Is there somebody who seems to be a little more mature around that? And I really encourage them to challenge each other because it is not just coming from teacher to them, but peer to peer. To me, that is transformational. I have seen a lot of transformation peer to peer.

Doug, in a manner like other instructors, wanted to use the relationships between students to help students understand how they could help one another grow, as opposed to relying simply on the professors’ initiatives. Matthew, during his individual interview, described a similar situation in which one student spoke privately with a student who had become extraordinarily vocal in his criticism of the professor:

[The] student who had … popped in to calm things down and bring things together and smooth things out, she and I were talking about it later, and she learned a great deal about ministry just from that moment. Even though the other person she was working with was someone who was training for ministry as well…. And, so, she learned this great lesson about not only was she ministering to him but calling him out and trying to smooth things over and have him see the professor in the best light.
Consequently, students learned not only ways to help one another grow, but also grew through the process of helping others. The sense of belonging that students felt in online courses, combined with the opportunities for growth mediated by peer-to-peer interventions, represented two of the primary advantages of close student-to-student relationships.

Therefore, relationships among students were necessary, albeit challenging to create, given the separation among online students in time and space. Nonetheless, discussion boards, video conferences, and required residential courses could be used to create these bonds among students despite their limitations and drawbacks. These groups, which instructors frequently limited to 10 or fewer students, often attended courses together across two or more academic terms and were admonished to respect the confidentiality of all remarks made within these groups. Once these connections had been developed among students, they fostered a sense of colleagueship among the students and allowed them to hone their own and one another’s ministry skills.

**Relationships between professors and their colleagues.** Professors learned from colleagues at their home institutions, as well as those at other institutions whom they met at conferences or during special presentations at their home institutions. They also frequently worked in collaboration with mentors, who were assisting their online students within their local contexts. These relationships with colleagues also helped professors hone their online teaching abilities, providing students with a meaningful educational experience.

**Colleagues at home institutions.** Instructors appreciated dialoguing with others at the seminaries where they taught, given the relatively recent development of web-based education and the helpful suggestions that many of their colleagues provided. As Matthew explained during his individual interview, “Online is still a lot like the Wild West. We’re still trying to figure out
what really is best.” Because much of the territory for online education is at least partially uncharted, instructors valued the conversations they had with others who taught in the online programs at their employing institutions. For instance, Karl praised a faculty meeting in which online instructors discussed common errors and ways to avoid them when holding, e.g., videoconferences with students, which were projected onto a screen for residential students who, thus, could interact with their online peers:

We spent an hour as a faculty sharing experiences and what we were learning about teaching online…. There were a lot of really helpful insights, some of them … extremely practical. One of the most common is that the natural instinct, when you have the live images of people online up on the screen, is that when you’re addressing a student who is a distance student, the instinct is to turn and look at the screen [in the classroom] because that’s where you’re seeing their face, whereas actually, what you’re doing then is you’re turning away from the camera, you know, you’re looking [in] the other direction. And so, it’s counterintuitive, and we’re trying to learn how to do it to remember that when we’re … addressing a distance student, we need to turn to the camera, not to the screen.

Therefore, colleagues at Karl’s institution helped one another overcome some of the logistical difficulties that emerged in their online courses.

Luke, during his individual interview, also noted the value of informal gatherings, such as unplanned conversations or mealtimes with online faculty who were on the residential campus throughout the academic year:

There are some individuals … here locally that are very adept at online teaching and in our conversations. It comes up in our discourse what has worked, and what hasn’t worked…. A lot of our faculty for the online courses are all within the [local
geographical] area…. At lunch, we get together and just visit. Many times, we don’t ever talk about this, but other times, we actually talk about some issues that come up in our online courses, and so it’s actually more [of] an informal conversation that a lot of things come up, and it becomes very productive.

Luke seemed to value unplanned conversations’ relaxed nature around campus as a venue for learning methods of tweaking various aspects of his online courses. Elizabeth, unlike Karl and Luke, described learning from the residential faculty who had taught at her seminary prior to her revamping the online program at her seminary: “Learning from the people who assisted in the program, the … leaders on the on-campus group, learning to say, ‘OK, what was existing and what was of value? What did they think was of value?’” Her comment seemed especially insightful, as she seemed to understand that quality online education would contain many of the same elements as quality residential education. Thus, not only formal presentations at official faculty gatherings, but also casual conversations with colleagues, both online and residential, helped professors like Luke improve their teaching.

Colleagues who structured the online learning platform. Surprisingly, Karl was the only professor who described, in detail, administrators and technical support workers’ role, perhaps because the officials at his institution had exerted much effort in structuring an online learning experience that uniquely blended residential and online students. During his individual interview, he seemed positively disposed to online education and attributed this, at least in part, to the painstaking efforts of those who had developed the online program:

There were other people, not me, in the institution ranging from the [highest administrator’s] office to the registrar to the dean to, you know, all levels, the technology people, who have collaborated on figuring out how to do this in a way that fits our values
and priorities as an institution and also how to enable the technology so that it really is an enabling, empowering technology, rather than a constant frustration.

Karl was perhaps the only professor to comment extensively on how others had crafted the online experience because the platform used at his institution included technology personnel and equipment in the residential classroom that were rather prominent in his blended residential and online teaching experience. The text-based discussions and videoconferences that many of the professors mentioned seemed relatively familiar to them, unlike the online students who were featured, *Brady Bunch*-style, as a group of talking heads in the blended online-with-residential classroom, where Karl taught.

**Colleagues at other institutions.** Instructors also learned from those who taught at other institutions while attending training sessions at their home institutions and while attending conferences. Felix, during his individual interview, described a training session in which an instructor from a nearby institution who had written on teaching in theological schools spoke at a faculty meeting and described various ways to develop online theological discussions, including remaining somewhat uninvolved, as a professor, in the online conversation: “When do I actually insert my comments into a discussion forum? So, I have kind of laid back because [the speaker’s] advice is once you talk as the professor, you are the voice of authority and may stifle discussion.” Luke, during his interview, mentioned a similar session for the faculty at his seminary: “Our education department had someone that’s a specialist on our online learning management system, and [this speaker] just helped with what are some of the possible bells and whistles … that can help with … connecting between the students.” These guest speakers at official faculty gatherings seemed to prompt instructors to consider ways in which they could develop their online courses to better meet their needs and those of their students.
Conferences also presented instructors with opportunities to learn about teaching theological reflection online. Luke, during his individual interview, noted how he had benefitted from conversations with professors from an ecclesial family other than his own:

I’ve met with several in the Roman Catholic theological education [community]; this is such a big concern for them in their formation of future seminarians, but also their deacons … but equally in conferences meeting with some that are really concerned about genuine theological reflection…. This is especially true for Roman Catholics, but not limited to [the Roman Catholic community], as online can be very impersonal, so how to have personal engagement and community as part of this process because for theological reflection, while certainly there’s an individual component, they [the students] also must be in community as well.

The communal nature of theological reflection for those within another ecclesial family reminded Luke of group conversations’ role in theological reflection, thereby balancing the individual written reflections that he used in his courses and with which he seemed more familiar. Felix similarly was influenced by a conference presentation delivered by an author who had written on theological reflection and whose procedure for theological reflection now served as the basis for theological reflection assignments in his online courses:

I was captivated by a presentation by Richard Osmer…. He wrote a book called *Practical Theology*, and he spoke at the Society of Professors of Christian Education…. His framework … we use in this case study approach. When a student writes it, they are supposed to write it this way.

Felix seemed to appreciate having an effective technique to structure the varying case studies that arose in ministry and truly seemed to benefit from attending this conference. While Felix
and Luke mentioned residential conferences, Matthew, during his individual interview, noted online discussions’ role with colleagues: “The Faith Based Online Learning Directors [FOLD] group … [does] webinars on … online education … in theology schools … how to lead discussions, how to get deep with them, how to help shepherd your students.” For Matthew and the other instructors, the opportunity to attend virtual or residential conferences afforded them opportunities to consider their teaching in the broader context of online theological education, thereby expanding the possibilities available for them and their students when interacting online.

**Relationships with mentors.** Instructors often collaborated with mentors who helped students achieve overall formation goals in their local contexts, as well as goals related specifically to theological reflection. For instance, during a group interview, Felix described the field mentor’s role at his institution as someone essential to his students’ educational experiences: “The … mentor out in the field, I would say, is the crucial person going through the experience with them, so we are depending on that mentor … [for] every student’s development … [both] character and competency.” Therefore, the mentor was central at Felix’s institution in helping students achieve general formation goals related to the seminary’s curriculum.

Conversely, at Elizabeth’s institution, a mentor who was not ensconced in the students’ ministry context conversed with students specifically about their written theological reflection papers. As Elizabeth explained during her individual interview, “They write them [their theological reflection papers] for conversation with their supervisors.” These supervisors, as Elizabeth went on to explain during the same interview, have been trained to respond to theological reflections prior to working with students:

> When I do supervisor meetings, … we are kind of practicing responding to papers…. We read a sample paper from a real student and say, “OK, how would you respond to this
student? What lines of inquiry would you go with? What would you refer and what would you ask more about?”

Thus, at Elizabeth’s institution, mentors helped students specifically develop and deepen their theological reflections by conversing with them about their written theological reflection essays. Regardless of the specific goals with which mentors assisted students, mentors frequently were involved in courses involving theological reflection.

**Students’ relationship with God.** Instructors repeatedly emphasized theological reflection’s role in helping foster students’ spiritual formation by connecting theological reflection to the role of the divine in everyday experiences, the ability of prayer to facilitate theological reflection, and the overlap between vocation and reflecting theologically.

**Importance of connecting theological reflection to spiritual formation.** Professors frequently mentioned the centrality of the spiritual in theological reflection. For example, John, in his letter of advice to future theological educators, described theological reflection’s holistic nature:

> Theological reflection must aim toward the whole person, not just the head…. It must engage the head, the heart or affections, and practice…. My goal in teaching theological reflection … for my students [is that] ... I hope their love and affection for God deepens as it impacts how they then love and have influence on those around them, no matter their context.

Theological reflection’s comprehensive nature was echoed by other professors, such as Alistair, who referred to it, during a group interview, as a “spiritual discipline,” and Luke, who insisted during his individual interview that theological reflection be more than a “theological/cognitive
Clearly, instructors wanted students to involve not only their minds, but also their spirits, in their theological reflections.

**Discerning the role of the divine in daily life.** Instructors felt that students should engage their entire selves in theological reflection – their entire lives, academic and nonacademic – by looking for how God was acting in their professional and personal lives. Ben, in his letter of advice to future educators, noted that professors should have students repeatedly ask themselves about the role of the divine in their seemingly commonplace experiences:

[I] advise future teachers of theological reflection to … use every opportunity to have the student reflect with this question: “Where do I find God in this?” … The goals of theological reflection … should be to experience God in Christ in our daily lives.

Ben clearly wanted instructors to use theological reflection to help students interweave the divine with the seemingly mundane events of daily life. Alistair, in his letter of advice, expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, “Theological reflection requires that same faithful devotion to examine and reflect on the intersection of man and God.” Ben and Alistair, like many of the professors, maintained that theological reflection can and should be used not only for ministry situations, but also for personal situations, to help students understand the role of the divine in their daily experiences.

**Linking theological reflection and prayer.** Several instructors noted prayer’s role in cultivating theological reflection. Isaac, during his individual interview, noted that he used a “collection of prayers” to help students understand theology’s role in Christians’ spiritual lives and as models of theological reflection. Luke also mentioned using prayers in his courses on theological reflection not as models of theological reflection, but as part of the process of theologically reflecting on an assigned reading. As Luke explained during his individual
interview, “A prayer retreat … so some books need those incremental times to reflect in between… so, you read chapter one and then you reflect on it a little bit and write it down and repeat.” The reflections that students composed after they read and prayed about each chapter of an assigned text then would form one of the primary written assignments for some of Luke’s classes. Luke felt that time and prayer after reading an assigned theological text were necessary to truly understand the material’s cognitive and spiritual significance. For Luke, Isaac, and other instructors, prayer represented an important aspect of theological reflection, especially in the spiritual formation of future religious leaders.

*Vocational identity and theological reflection.* Several instructors helped students discern, or at least develop, their calls to specific ministry opportunities as part of their courses on theological reflection. For instance, Howard specifically connected theological reflection’s role with helping students understand the vocation for which God specially had equipped them. During his individual interview, he noted that one of the “benefits that students get from this [i.e., learning about theological reflection] … is … a clarification … of their understanding of God’s will for their life and their calling … the tasks that God has put before them.” For Howard, as well as other instructors, theological reflection helped students understand their unique roles and identities as religious leaders, as well as the specific responses they should enact during given ministry events.

In conclusion, professors formed relationships with colleagues at their home institutions, as well as those at other institutions, and these relationships helped them improve their online teaching. Moreover, many instructors developed relationships with mentors who assisted students in their local contexts with overall formation and, in one instance, specifically with theological reflection. Finally, instructors sought to develop, through theological reflection,
students’ relationship with the divine by connecting theological principles with daily life, prayer, and their vocations. These relationships showed how the educational experience involved connections within and beyond the local seminary community.

**Experience**

Instructors incorporated past, present, and future experiences in conversations and assignments requiring students to reflect theologically on personal and pastoral events or decisions. Instructors maintained that the online environment allowed for greater access to theological education, thereby creating an exceptionally diverse group of students who contributed an equally diverse set of experiences to the conversations involving theological reflection.

**Past experiences.** Instructors drew on their past experiences of themselves and those of their students and others as sources for theological reflection. For example, Doug, during his individual interview, explained that he allowed students to utilize past experiences for case study presentations involving theological reflection: “You [the student] write something you went through, and it’s resolved, but you want feedback on maybe what you could have done differently.” Although most students in Doug’s class chose to use current experiences, Doug seemed to appreciate the benefit of retroactively considering experience to improve pastoral decisions in the future. Likewise, professors would use others’ past experiences as fodder for theological reflection. Howard, in his courses, asked students to reflect theologically on missionaries’ biographies to discern decisions made in an appropriate or inappropriate manner. As he explained during his interview, “I really want them to … think … theologically about the lessons they can glean from the missionary's life…. I tell them it is OK to look at a missionary's life and say I think they made a mistake.” Howard did not want his students to repeat the
mistakes of others who may not have properly considered their decisions’ theological basis. Karl reiterated this sentiment during his individual interview, in discussing the use of case studies from prior missions practices: “There’s a long, long history of Christian missionary practice, and it contains many wonderful, marvelous moments, and it also contains some really bad ones, so there’s a lot to learn from past experience.” Like Howard, Karl felt that others’ past experiences provided rich fodder for theological reflection.

Just as instructors drew on the past experiences of their students and other missionaries or ministers, so did they draw on their own experiences to illustrate the integration of theology and pastoral practice. For example, George, during his individual interview, characterized his teaching style as one filled with stories that helped anchor sometimes-abstract theological concepts in his students’ minds:

I try to bring in lots of stories, which will keep the students engaged, but also at the same time ask, well, why do these folks, or maybe even why do I do it this way, or the people I have been working with do it this way? And is it a good idea? What’s wrong with it? What could be done better? What’s right with it? What can be done better? So, I draw a lot on personal experience in ministry of a number of years in different countries…. And my teaching style is very much narrative-based. I find people remember concepts better if they are embedded in a narrative than if they [are] just presented in point form.

George valued narratives’ ability to engage students and, thus, facilitate their recall of embodied theological practices. Luke echoed this sentiment during a group interview by noting how he used personal experiences to illustrate the expression of theological beliefs through embodied actions:
The discussion of theology … modeling how this interplay and process takes place with stories and narratives of how it happened in my own life, then becomes a model by which they can … the students can start to see how that may take place in theirs. So, using my own stories, if you will, and concrete examples, has helped the students be able to start to picture their own narrative in that same engagement.

Therefore, Luke valued stories from his own life that illustrated theological beliefs because they served as examples that students could consider when seeking to embody their beliefs. Thus, instructors drew on past experiences from their own and others’ lives to help students understand the connection between beliefs and behaviors.

**Present experiences.** Instructors asked students to reflect on current ministry experiences to help them learn to make pastoral decisions that were grounded in theology. Professors noted that online students often were serving in ministry positions so that they easily could find situations on which they desired to reflect. During his individual interview, Alistair described an assignment involving a case study in current pastoral experiences that many instructors used: “It is a case study that students write from actual ministry encounters from which they are serving at the time. We want the encounter ongoing and unresolved.” Such live case studies allowed students to be in the process of choosing a course of action while engaging in theological reflection with their peers and instructors to learn the habit of consciously choosing pastoral actions rooted in theology. Felix, in his letter of advice, reiterated the importance of having students consider decisions related to their current ministerial contexts:

> Of utmost importance is a setting … where actual ministry case studies are examined … [so] a student … [can be] integrating theology, the Word, and ministry … in a context where they are made to make a decision on how to proceed with a situation.
Thus, experiences related to students’ current pastoral contexts allowed them to become accustomed to choosing and defending a course of action based on theological principles, rather than ministry fads or powerful individuals’ whims.

These live situations often were available to online students, who, unlike many of their residential peers, were serving in ministry positions. Elizabeth, during her individual interview, expressed a view shared by several instructors that distance students frequently could understand pastoral decisions’ complexities and difficulties because they actively were serving in ministry:

My online students who are located across the country and around the world are almost [all] … usually 100% of them … involved actively in full-time ministry. And so, thinking about the questions of theological reflection and their ministerial choices, and their leadership within a community, it is very ready. They already know the consequences of decisions. They can see them day-to-day, which makes it actually, in some ways, an easier group to teach in that regard than many of my residential students, who have tended younger over the last number of years, some coming right out of, not too often, but some coming from undergrad, with maybe one or two years of ministry experience and let’s say a year of service or a couple years of service, where they haven't had the same sense of ownership around their ministerial actions and the responsibility for them as the students who are in the work full time, generally collecting a paycheck, having to respond to real bosses, pastors, or whoever ... that actually [are] engaging in the real-life work of students online, in my experience, has been, in some ways, easier because they are very ready to talk about the issues that they are facing on a day-to-day basis. It has been harder to get the on-campus or residential students to imagine what that might be
like because more and more of them have never had the weight of that responsibility directly on their shoulders.

Elizabeth, like many instructors, felt that online students who currently were serving as religious leaders more easily could obtain experiences on which to reflect and could better understand the tangled web of relationships and concerns that influenced pastoral decisions.

**Future experiences.** Some instructors used future experiences to broaden the scope of possible events or issues on which students could reflect. For instance, Isaac helped students prepare a formal statement of their pastoral theology that he hoped they could use in future job applications or ministry positions. As he explained during his individual interview:

The students … are required to write an essay, which is a theology of worship for the local church…. I am asking for their own reflections and summary of what they think are the salient features of a theology [of] worship for the local church … to understand and apply the doctrines of Christianity to life and ministry…. We are trying to boil down Biblical teaching, theological principles, historical practices in the church to something that can apply in the local context…. It is intended to be written to an audience of the local church, perhaps most useful for students seeking ministry positions in worship areas … a personal manifesto of worship for the local church.

Isaac wanted his students to articulate the theological beliefs on which they would base their ministry decisions so that they could explain their pastoral choices’ foundations to themselves and others.

While Isaac used a statement of beliefs and illustrations of these beliefs in actual ministry settings, Doug allowed students to choose from past, present, or imagined future ministry situations as fodder for theological reflection. As he explained during his individual interview:
The case studies for the class … So, I tell them the ideal one is something you are dealing with right now that's not resolved. So, they talk about what's happening, why they believe it is happening, what God's word … [or] you write something you went through, and it’s resolved, but you want feedback on maybe what you could have done differently. And then the third level is, ask your mentor if they know of something. And then the fourth level is you make something up that sounds interesting. So, 95% of the time, it is something they are either going through or had [been] going through that they wanted feedback on.

Although Doug preferred current ministry experiences, he appreciated the value of allowing students to choose the experiences on which they wanted to reflect theologically with him and their classmates. Like other instructors, Doug and Isaac broadened the situations on which their students could reflect by allowing or requiring them to consider future or imagined experiences, as well as current pastoral situations.

**Linking experience to theology.** Instructors routinely helped students connect these past, present, and future experiences to theological beliefs because they realized that actions expressed implicit and explicit beliefs. For instance, Elizabeth, during her individual interview, explained that students expressed their beliefs through ministerial choices, even though they may not have been aware of such expression:

> My objective with them was to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers and the choices that they make and the decisions in that, and also to recognize that those are theologically grounded, whether they are aware of it or not…. The challenge is how do you get people to recognize that their choices are theologically grounded…. We [are] trying to unpack the theological vision that’s already in place in
your head. And also to tease out what might be the theological vision of other ministers or settings through evidence they might see in front of them. So, what does the space … communicate [about] what they believe about the person of Jesus Christ? What does it say? What does the space in a parish and the way you experience hospitality there say about what it means to be church? To get students to unpack those kinds of things … My primary interest is that they begin to see themselves as a ministerial actor and the responsibilities of that work. And part of that responsibility is being self-aware theologically … to get them to recognize that there is a theological perspective that is informing how we understand the good and particular aims in our work.

Like many of the instructors, Elizabeth wanted her students to understand that their pastoral actions expressed theological beliefs, even when they were not cognizant of this expression and that others’ theological beliefs could be surmised, at least partially, from others’ actions.

John, during his individual interview, echoed Elizabeth’s concern for anchoring pastoral choices to theological beliefs and highlighted the tendency of many in ministry to consider pragmatic issues, such as attendance or donations, rather than the theological principles on which their decisions were made:

When they are reflecting on not just best practices, but kind of the moorings behind best practices, Biblically and theologically, they have a filter … [to] just say, “OK, now, why are those best practices? You know, where are they grounded biblically, theologically? Where might be a question? Is there something that needs to be kind of rethought through or rearticulated?” … They’re … trying to … say, “Hey, are we making sure we haven’t just said, ‘Hey, is this working? Is this working? Is this working?’ But, ‘Why are we doing this? Is this right? What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and
love of neighbor for me, for my team, for if there is a church or community of believers here?” … “If we do this, if I do this, what is it saying? Not only about us, what is it saying about the Lord?” … So, I think for a lot of students, it’s just helped them have a new set of lenses to begin to think and ask and hopefully practice in a healthier way.

John, like Elizabeth and others, wanted students to understand that their ministerial actions should consciously and primarily be guided by theological beliefs, rather than strategies, numerical outcomes, or similar issues.

**Diverse contexts encountered in the online environment.** Professors repeatedly commented on the diverse contexts about which they and their students were able to learn due to the greater access afforded by online education. John, during a group interview, explained that many students would not be able to attend seminary without the availability of online education: “The online opportunity, it does give much more access…. It is giving access to people that may not even consider or have opportunity for certain types of education really around the world.”

John felt that many religious leaders might not have the opportunity to be educated formally without online educational platforms, and he viewed this benefit from online education as something very valuable for himself and his students. Karl, during his individual interview, also highlighted online learning’s value in providing greater access to seminary training and connected this with the kaleidoscope of contexts to which he and his students were exposed in online classes:

> Having classes available online, as well as on campus, it obviously really broadens the range of students who are able to study with us, and also then you get the benefit of their wider range of life experience. I think that’s, to me, that’s the core benefit is that you just [have] more people involved, and they really enrich the learning.
Karl and John, like many instructors, valued online education’s ability to reach students far from campus who may not otherwise have opportunities to attend seminary.

Thus, by broadening access to seminary education, the online environment enhanced students and professors’ educational opportunities by helping them learn about unfamiliar ministry settings. For instance, Karl, during the same interview, explained that he and his students benefited from the diverse contexts in which students were serving:

In another class I had, I was wanting to talk about the dynamics of Christian witness and mission in South Asia in India, which, of course, is … very complex in origination, so it’s hard to generalize. But there was a student in my class who actually is from India, had served as a pastor there, and so I invited him to take about half the morning and to talk about his own experience and to give a lot of perspective on the Indian context that he had more expertise in it by far than I did.

Karl, like others, maintained that the online environment facilitated the inclusion of such diverse contexts because it allowed people worldwide to connect in the online classroom.

Moreover, professors felt that exposing students to the larger global Christian context was essential, given the increasing diversity in churches and the importance of considering ministerial practices in a variety of contexts. For instance, Doug, during a focus group, commented that theological beliefs become even more essential when moving from a familiar context, such as a North American church, to a church in another country:

My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel. In the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that's now in Slovenia…. What I’m discovering is what I experience when I travel internationally, … and what happens when you go anywhere internationally, you can't use your American analogies. They
don't fit. So, either you know, you teach the purity of the Word, … having students in multiple ministry contexts, and you start combining international contexts. Their best practices go out the window because best practices don’t mean anything; there is not the same best practice. Someone in Colombia who is doing ministry there, and somebody in Utah and Israel, and South Korea, and a pastor in China who leaves China every two weeks to get on the call, you know, he goes into South Korea, so it pushes them to go to the purity of what the theology doctrine scripture says, and the purity of what ministry, the core of it … and what they are discovering by engaging and having to listen and try to understand another student’s context…. They have to get to the purity of what scripture is saying, and theology, because that’s what breaks through cultural barriers…. In many calls, I’ll [have] five different countries represented sometimes. And they can’t just go, “Well, you know what they say.” That phrase doesn’t go well because they are like, “I don't know what they say. I am doing ministry in China, and I have to leave to make this phone call. I go to South Korea twice a week just to make this call.” So, I'm saying the benefit of the international and online is for the student too. Like there, it is pushing them to a different level, which I love.

Doug felt that the multiple international contexts’ value, combined within the same online class, forced students to consider their decisions’ theological basis, as trends or supposedly best practices did not necessarily match those of the numerous contexts in which other students were serving. However, shared theological beliefs united these students and could help them reach an appropriate decision for the case studies they considered in their group videoconferences.
Karl also valued the global community represented in the online environment but emphasized that this helped students serve within their own local diverse communities. As he explained during a group interview:

We have courses that are taught in classrooms, but that include distance students [through videoconferences shared with residential students synchronously]. There is remarkable international diversity. A class I started yesterday is more – the seminar part of my class, there is only eight students in it, but I think that we have five different countries represented just within that group. So yeah, I would agree with you. The concept of a global period where Christianity is a worldwide movement. I mean, it is concretely very real…. I think it is very exciting. It really expresses the remarkable universality of the Gospel and all cultures…. I think that part of the value to the students is to be educated in that kind of diverse multicultural environment [which] is very appropriate preparation for the kind of world that they have to minister in, you know, that they have to lead in. So, why not experience it in the classroom?

Karl valued the plethora of contexts that entered the online classroom for their value in helping students understand the numerous contexts in which Christians resided and with which they needed to be familiar to minister in their local churches effectively.

In conclusion, professors utilized their past, present, and future experiences and those of their students and others as material for theological reflection. Many instructors viewed current and unresolved situations as the best material for reflection, but nonetheless valued the role of past experiences, such as stories from their own ministerial contexts, as well as future experiences, in broadening the range of possible issues to be considered in reflective conversations. Instructors emphasized the need to evaluate decisions made about these various
experiences according to theological beliefs, as opposed to popular strategies or personal preferences. Finally, instructors frequently mentioned greater access to seminary education available through the online environment and felt that this access expanded the ministerial contexts with which they and their students could become familiar.

**Space**

Instructors emphasized the necessity of distinguishing the online classroom from other commonly encountered online spaces, such as social media, because of the problematic behaviors sometimes exhibited on platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. Additionally, they commented on the endurance of written or audio/visually recorded artifacts created in the online classroom compared with the more fleeting nature of spoken discourse in the residential classroom. Professors also mentioned the necessity of private spaces for theological reflection and instructor-student communications to balance the public discussion boards or videoconferences shared among all students. Finally, instructors emphasized the continually changing nature of online classrooms that frequently were modified based on students’ perceived needs and interests, as well as the continually changing ministry contexts that provided experiences for reflection.

**The Facebook effect.** Instructors repeatedly noted the influence of problematic behaviors witnessed on social media that were replicated in the online classroom. Alistair, during a group interview, dubbed social media’s influence in the online classroom as “the Facebook effect” and explained this term as follows:

Working through case studies in an online class is what I call dealing with the Facebook effect. Social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye and you perhaps say things you
might not say face-to-face. There was nothing mean or hateful or anything like that spoken in the online class, but it was more direct faster than I see normally in a live classroom. I will see students progress relationally until they reach that level where they can challenge one another face-to-face. The online world started out with bolder and stronger challenges, with push-backs that we don’t see in the live classroom until much later. So, that’s one of the differences I experienced in teaching live and online.

Being able to avoid encountering classmates in informal settings, such as break times, seemed to embolden some online students to criticize their peers in ways they would not employ until they had known one another for several class sessions in a brick-and-mortar setting.

Luke, during his individual interview, also noted that students behaved online in ways in which he would not envision them behaving in the residential classroom:

It’s an issue we run into with a lot of social media, and that is that things that people would never say face-to-face they don’t mind saying online…. We have some that will just flippantly say things just to put it out there, and I would read it and think, “Really? This is not a good way to write.” … It’s almost like they’re so used to text-messaging short things, they don’t really think the implication of how they wrote it…. Let me use the terms, even pejorative, derogatory, or worded poorly in the sense of almost a snide-remark kind of thing, that if we were face-to-face in a classroom, I don’t think I would ever hear, all [of] the sudden, it comes into the email or … the online class…. The whole social media mode has almost kind of lost some of that decorum, being careful and sensitive or, you know, more cognizant of our speech patterns and communication patterns. So, that’s one challenge I have seen repeated.
Like Alistair, Luke felt that some students chose to behave inappropriately because they, perhaps, had become accustomed to unusually abrasive remarks seen on social media platforms. However, unlike Alistair, Luke felt that some students sometimes could be less-than-charitable in their remarks to their peers, as opposed to simply being more direct or forthright in their communication at an earlier point in the online class.

Matthew explained the problematic behaviors witnessed by Alistair and Luke as being due to the nature of online communication that is mediated through some sort of non-living object, such as a cell phone or laptop. Matthew, during his individual interview, compared inappropriate online behavior to the hasty judgments made about fellow travelers who are driving in an apparently reckless fashion:

The artificial constraint of the computer, the computer screen, the keypad … online or when they’re in cars … we have trouble seeing … their humanity…. When online, we see them … kind of like machines because we’re interacting with them through a machine…. That’s the same thing we do with cars…. I’ll be driving, and I might get frustrated with someone … [until I] realize … that’s a human being in that car over there, and we have no idea why they just acted the way they did. We have no way to connect with their inner experience. Why are they going so fast through a 25? Well, it might be that they’re trying to get somewhere to a sick relative or for some other reason. It could be that they’re doing it because they’re … not thinking and not making good choices. But at any rate, now we can see them as humans, and since we see ourselves as humans and desire grace and mercy, we can do that as well. And I think it can work as an analogy for online for students that we have to remember each other’s humanity.
Matthew connected the somewhat-spontaneous judgments that drivers might make of those driving in a seemingly careless manner to the rather spontaneous criticisms that online students might make about one another. Matthew attributed these judgments and criticisms to online platforms’ mediated nature, in which students cannot fully understand the context of other students’ remarks and various circumstances that might explain apparent errors in their comments. Matthew’s comments seemed especially insightful, as they offered at least a partial remedy to the sometimes-abrupt or abrasive remarks that he and other instructors described – the remedy of simply remembering that online communications were being made and received by humans, not machines.

Netiquette policies to create a safe space. Given students’ tendency to interact with one another in sometimes-inappropriate ways, instructors emphasized the necessity of creating ground rules for online interactions. For example, John, during a group interview, explained that he viewed ground rules for online conversations as helpful: “This idea of netiquette … you know, let’s think the best of each other, and we are a community of learners and here is what this looks like in an online setting.” Clearly, John felt that simply reminding students to be understanding of and charitable toward one another helped create a hospitable online classroom. Isaac also noted the value of ground rules in creating a safe space for online discussions. During a group interview, Isaac explained that he created a safe space for theological reflection by reminding students of “ground rules of … the mutual good … and I [find] … that to be very, very helpful to them, be very encouraging to the whole group.” Isaac felt that explaining to students that they should seek to benefit not only themselves, but also all those within the online community helped them behave appropriately in the online classroom. Thus, although instructors like Alistair and Luke described online communications as being sometimes less
courteous than in the residential classroom, other professors – including Matthew, John, and Isaac – offered policies such as remembering one another’s humanity, considering one another in the best possible manner, and seeking the good of all those within the online community as possible solutions for fostering a hospitable online classroom.

**Digital artifacts.** Professors also remarked on the somewhat-problematic nature of written discussions and recorded lectures that, unlike comments made or lectures delivered in a residential classroom, remained in cyberspace and could be reviewed by anyone in the educational community who had access to the course or course archive. For instance, Howard, during his individual interview, explained that recorded video lectures could be more intimidating than residential lectures:

I try new things regularly. Sometimes they fail. I think online educators now have to be willing to fail. It is scary to fail on video because the video seems to last longer than a mistake in class … but you do it online, and it kind of lasts…. I encourage or advise people to be willing to take risks.

For Howard, the digital object created in the online classroom caused him to be somewhat more self-conscious than he necessarily would be in the residential classroom because the video endured much longer than his comments in a traditional classroom.

Not only was digital artifacts’ longevity a concern for instructors such as Howard, but written discussions’ longevity also was a concern for students. Matthew, who had been an online student and was now an online instructor, also noted the endurance of comments posted on discussion boards as a concern for students:

Probably one of the difficulties with online education in that regard is if you say something in a regular classroom, the words exist only as long as they’re audible, and
they exist in bits and pieces in people’s memories. Online, they exist because they’re written down…. If you type on the course chatroom, “Hey, when are we getting our papers back?” it’s hard to read the tone, and it’s always there, and you look like that guy or that gal.

Matthew felt that students would be less likely to ask various questions in the online classroom, because they knew that their comments would remain in the online classroom and perhaps be misinterpreted by the instructor or their peers. In contrast, such a comment or question in the residential classroom would remain in others’ memories, if at all, as a student asking a procedural question in an appropriate or inappropriate tone. However, the digital object remains to be analyzed and judged. Consequently, the creation of digital footprints inhibited, to some extent, the interactions that occurred in the cyber-classroom.

Private spaces. Professors highlighted the private spaces that they created for students to reflect theologically and that they used to discuss delicate issues about online behavior with individual students. Alistair, during his individual interview, described the blend of public and private spaces for theological reflections that resembled those used by many instructors:

It is a case study that students write from actual ministry encounters from which they are serving…. We want the encounter ongoing and unresolved…. Each week, students take their turn as the presenter, and the rest of the class take their turn as the ones … taking the case study apart, and putting it back together, and presenting it back to the student … I ask them, “What do you think about the dynamics that are at play? What are the issues? … How does this match with my understanding of biblical stories that relate to this incident?” … We ask [the] student presenter to write an additional piece only for the professor with their concluding thoughts. What did you learn about your own personal
reflection in this matter so far? What needs to be done? Or does anything need to be done? And if so, by whom? Sometimes it is you, sometimes it is them, and sometimes someone else.

Alistair, like many others, balanced the public space for theological reflection that occurred in group discussions with private theological reflections submitted only to the instructor. While Alistair did not explain the rationale for public and private spaces for reflection, Luke, during a group interview, explained that he wanted students to be able to write about and discuss their ministry experiences: “So, responding by writing and then being able to discuss that is crucial.” Consequently, professors seemed to appreciate the necessity of training future leaders who could express themselves, especially concerning ministerial decisions and quandaries, not only in group discussions, but also privately to themselves in writing.

Private spaces shared only by the instructor and students also were used to address inappropriate behaviors exhibited in the online environment. For instance, Felix, during a group interview, stated that he preferred to discuss netiquette issues with students through private, written communications, rather than verbal reprimands in online discussions:

> The abrasive comments … I find it hard to rebuke somebody on a discussion forum. So, I found myself moving to a message to people…. If I sense an attitude … I have a tendency to move toward a direct message of some kind through the classroom site.

Felix, like other professors, preferred to address somewhat-delicate issues, such as classroom behavior, with students individually, rather than publicly on a discussion board or group videoconference. Therefore, private spaces were used by professors as venues for both theological reflection and conversations about appropriate conduct in the public spaces shared among all students.
Continually changing spaces. Professors mentioned not only public and private spaces in the cyber-classroom, but also the online classroom’s continually changing nature and the ministry contexts discussed in these classrooms. Instructors frequently modified their online course materials to best meet students’ perceived needs and interests. Elizabeth, during her individual interview, described the numerous changes she had made in her online classroom over the years:

Well, one of the important things to pay attention to is how the online experience [has] evolved…. Because students were at a distance … and some in different countries, my communication through them was by email…. Every student has to write a case study based out of their ministerial experience…. When I first was doing it with the online group, it took place over the course of emails, and that was very cumbersome and lengthy. Eventually, after a couple years, I moved from email to using … Blackboard discussion board…. But again, that was taking at least a month to get through a case, and that’s with only five people in a group. It just would take that long for people to read material, respond to it, respond to each other, … and then in recent times … I do live conversations with students…. We get together in real time … then the conversation takes place on the case within the same amount of time it would in [a residential] class, 50 to 60 minutes.

Elizabeth’s willingness to modify course materials repeatedly was characteristic of many of the online instructors, who felt that online platforms should be adjusted based on their own and their students’ reactions to the materials. For example, Howard ceased using online exams to verify students’ familiarity with reading materials, given some students’ predilection toward quibbling over answer choices:
I, for years, have not done reading quizzes for assigned readings. I get tired of students forgetting to do them and asking me to re-open the quiz or debating an answer to the quiz…. So, I tell them, “I want you to read what I assign, I want you to think about what you read, and then I want you to write about what you think.”

Howard, due to concerns about students’ reactions, and Elizabeth, due to concerns about efficiency, modified their online courses. Their willingness to experiment with new assignments or technologies was shared by other instructors who felt that courses should be works in progress, rather than static, prepackaged curricula.

Instructors not only highlighted course materials’ continually changing nature, but also noted the continually changing contexts in which their students were ministering – contexts that served as fodder for theological reflection in the online classroom. For instance, Felix, during his individual interview, stated that many of the situations with which he was familiar, given his years in ministry, were no longer situations that his students encountered: “The professor can bring their case studies, but … a lot of my case studies are from the olden days…. I think I can bring a handful of ones that are still relevant, but they are not always.” Obviously, Felix understood that the difficulties he may have encountered as a youth pastor often were quite different from those that his students encountered today; therefore, they were required to submit fresh case studies from their current field experiences. Elizabeth also commented on the changing contexts in which her students were serving. During a group interview, Elizabeth remarked:

I think one of the challenges is … that … ministry contexts are always changing because the social world is so diverse, for one thing, and that we are dealing with increasingly diverse students…. Many of you [the other professors in the group interview] talked
about intercultural or international student bodies [and] … to always be on the lookout for “How do I help them read their own setting effectively?” which means then I have got to figure out what their setting is. So, I think that that’s a particular challenge. You can’t assume that because you have your own experience in ministry that you can simply translate that and understand theirs because their setting would be different, their communities are different, the expectations in those communities might be different.

Elizabeth, like Felix, understood that ministry contexts experienced in the past, especially in a late 20th or early 21st century North American context, may not resemble those in which students were currently serving. Thus, not only did course materials change over time, but the pastoral experiences examined through these online course materials also changed similarly over time.

In conclusion, instructors sought to differentiate the online classroom from other online platforms, such as social media, by emphasizing ground rules for discussions, but nonetheless mentioned the difficulties affiliated with all online platforms, given written discussions or recorded lectures’ longevity in contrast with the rather fleeting nature of spoken discourse in residential classrooms. Furthermore, professors described the private spaces that they developed for students, in which students could reflect apart from the group discussions and in which they, likewise, could receive comments from instructors concerning delicate issues such as appropriate behavior for group discussions. Finally, professors noted how their online courses continually changed based on their and their students’ reactions to course materials, as well as the continually changing contexts in which their students ministered.
Research Question Responses

The central research question of this study asked, “How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?” This question is answered in the following sections, which address the three sub-questions associated with the central research question, relate these sub-questions’ answers to the central research question, then formulate the phenomenological description of the experience of teaching theological reflection online.

Sub-Question One: Content and Context

Sub-question One asked, “What do participants describe as the content and context of their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?” This question probed not only the texture (i.e., the what) and structure (i.e., the how) of the experience but also the social and historical influences on these structures and textures (Creswell, 2013; Davis, 2015; Moustakas, 1994).

Content: Experience. The content principally related to the theme of experience, but also was addressed in the themes of relationships and the online space. Instructors used their past experiences – as well as those of their students and others, plus their students’ present or future experiences – as fodder for theological reflection. For example, Doug, during his individual interview, explained that he allowed students to present a case study on a past ministry event that they “went through, and it’s resolved, but you [the student] want feedback on maybe what you could have done differently.” Karl, during his individual interview, noted that he helped students analyze others’ ministry experiences: “There’s a long, long history of Christian missionary practice, and it contains many wonderful, marvelous moments, and it also contains some really bad ones, so there’s a lot to learn from past experience.” While some instructors used students
and other ministers or missionaries’ past experiences to serve as springboards for theological reflection, others, like George, preferred to draw on their prior experiences to illustrate the embodiment of theological principles in ministry practice. As George stated during his individual interview:

> So, I draw a lot on personal experience in ministry of a number of years in different countries … and my teaching style is very much narrative-based. I find people remember concepts better if they are embedded in a narrative than if they [are] just presented in point form.

Therefore, past experiences served as opportunities for theological reflection in the online classroom and extended the range of experiences available to the educational community.

Students’ present and future experiences also afforded opportunities for theological reflection. Present experiences were by far the most frequently referenced source for theological reflection. Alistair, during his individual interview, described a common use of current ministry experiences: “It is a case study that students write from actual ministry encounters from which they are serving at the time. We want the encounter ongoing and unresolved.” Many of the instructors’ students were serving at least part time in some sort of ministry or missions so that such cases were readily available. For students who were either not in ministry or planning on moving to a new ministry context upon graduation, future ministry contexts sometimes served as settings upon which to reflect. As Isaac explained during his individual interview:

> The students … are required to write an essay, which is a theology of worship for the local church…. I am asking … [them] … to understand and apply the doctrines of Christianity to life and ministry … perhaps most useful for students seeking ministry positions in worship areas.
Therefore, possible future or actual current ministry events, like past events, formed much of the content of the experience of teaching theological reflection and illustrated the vast array of events available for reflection.

**Content: Theology.** In addition to experiences, professors referenced the theological principles with which they helped students analyze past, present, and foreseeable future ministry events. In their courses, instructors repeatedly helped students analyze ministry events to help them understand the practice of embodying professed beliefs in ministry actions. John, during his individual interview, described the process that many instructors used in their online courses:

> When they are reflecting on … the moorings … Biblically and theologically, they have a filter … [to] just say … “Hey, are we making sure we haven’t just said, ‘Hey, is this working? Is this working? Is this working?’ But, ‘Why are we doing this? Is this right? What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor for me, for my team, for if there is a church or community of believers here?’” … “If we do this, if I do this, what is it saying? Not only about us, what is it saying about the Lord?” … So, I think for a lot of students, it’s just helped them have a new set of lenses to begin to think and ask and hopefully practice in a healthier way.

Thus, theological beliefs, as opposed to merely pragmatic concerns, such as efficiency, served as lenses by which to view – and when necessary, modify – ministry actions.

**Content: Conversations.** The relationships created by the online course allowed for conversations that served as the venue for theologically analyzing ministry experiences and represented another primary component of the content of teaching theological reflection online. These conversations included discussion boards and videoconferences, as well as written assignments submitted to the instructor.
**Discussion boards.** Discussion boards were used both to cultivate a sense of community among students, as well as spaces for theological discussions. As George explained during his individual interview, “In their first discussion,” students describe, “what ministry they might have,” and Howard, during his individual interview, remarked that he asked students to “introduce themselves to the class … [with] a video or, if … [they] need to write it up, include a picture [photo] of … [their] family or … [themselves] engaged in one of … [their] favorite hobbies.” These introductions were designed to foster rapport so that meaningful theological reflection then could occur on discussion boards later. For instance, Isaac asked students, on their later discussion boards, to engage in “reflecting on these theological assignments.” Thus, discussion boards allowed for asynchronous conversations concerning students’ personal and professional interests, as well as their thoughts on assigned readings.

**Videoconferences.** Videoconferences, likewise, were used as course content to develop rapport and engage in conversations about theological reflection. Cameron, during his individual interview, explained that synchronous videoconferences allowed students to establish relationships with one another because they resembled face-to-face conversations in real time:

Growing as a community … live participation … is crucial…. Live together and be together, and that's how you grow together…. You can know their thoughts by their [written] responses, but you can’t see their reactions, and what their face looks like…. That is a very important part to being online to try to get people reacting…. You can make some of that happen by having the visual meeting … GoToMeeting, Zoom…. That’s an important aspect.
For Cameron, being together simultaneously in cyberspace allowed students to strengthen bonds like those created in residential course discussions, given the visual element of seeing one another’s faces and the immediate reactions to various comments or suggestions.

Felix also used videoconferences but emphasized their role in facilitating group discussions about case studies in the students’ ministry contexts. As he explained during his individual interview:

My theological reflection and a case study approach ... we are using Skype for Business ... So, “What's going on?” ... The person [student] is supposed to describe the facts.... And then the second concept is ... interpretive: “Why is this going on?” ... I ask the [other] students to give their speculation.... “Why do you think this is an issue?” ... The student ... presenter reads their interpretive section ... and then we go on to part three, which is normative. And that is ... “How does Bible theology and ethics relate to this subject?” ... So, I ask the [other] students ... “What do you think applies?” ... “What might be a relevant scripture theological idea here?” And, so, then they share for a while. And then the student presenter gives their scripture.... And then part number four is pragmatic: “What are our options?” ... I say to the class, “What do you think is the best way to go?” ... So, that has just produced a lot of great conversations over time. And like I said, that works just fine in online reflection and face-to-face.

The give-and-take that occurred during Felix’s Skype sessions resembled the residential discussions that he had hosted for theological reflection and allowed for meaningful conversation centered around ministry experiences from students’ current field settings. Because synchronous videoconferences most closely resembled residential classroom discussions, they represented a significant amount of the course content for many instructors.
Essays: Written conversations between students and professors. Instructors also used written assignments concerning theological reflection or assigned readings. Frequently, the written assignments related to the case studies presented in the group discussions, although they also were used to ensure that students had read and reflected on assigned texts. Alistair, during his individual interview, described a representative assignment that related to the group discussions on theological reflection:

It is a case study that students write from actual ministry encounters from which they are serving at the time…. We ask [the] student presenter to write an additional piece only for the professor with their concluding thoughts. What did you learn about your own personal reflection in this matter so far? What needs to be done? Or does anything need to be done? And if so, by whom? Sometimes it is you, sometimes it is them, and sometimes someone else.

By writing about their case study prior to presenting it to others, students were able to consider their own theological views on the event and articulate these views to their professors.

Written assignments also were assigned to verify that students had thought about and completed relevant readings. For example, Luke asked students to read and reflect on course textbooks. As he explained during his individual interview:

So, you read chapter one, and then you reflect on it a little bit and write it down and repeat … like a typical textbook, not long … something, you know, maybe like a 200-page or a 180-page or 160-page textbook…. Especially [if] it’s ministerial or missions and then coming back as what are your takeaways, you know, think about this. Pray about it; what did you learn from that?
By ensuring that students had reviewed assigned materials, Luke and other instructors could verify that students were sufficiently familiar with materials to engage meaningfully in theological reflection in group discussions.

**Content: Continually changing.** While conversations centering around theological reflection involving past, present, and future experiences represented most of the content in the professors’ courses, the content within these courses was changing continually. Professors frequently modified their courses as they received feedback from students and learned about new methods of instruction. Moreover, the students’ ministry contexts changed as the congregations they served and the contexts in which they served developed over time. Elizabeth, during her individual interview, outlined how her course had changed over the years as she learned ways to streamline the theological reflection groups as technologies advanced:

Well, one of the important things to pay attention to is how the online experience [has] evolved … Because students were at a distance … and some in different countries, my communication through them was by email…. Every student has to write a case study based out of their ministerial experience…. When I first was doing it with the online group, it took place over the course of emails, and that was very cumbersome and lengthy. Eventually, after a couple years, I moved from email to using … Blackboard discussion board…. But again, that was taking at least a month to get through a case, and that's with only five people in a group. It just would take that long for people to read material, respond to it, respond to each other…. And then, in recent times … I do live conversations with students… We get together in real time … then the conversation takes place on the case within the same amount of time it would in [a residential] class, 50 to 60 minutes.
Elizabeth, like many other instructors, repeatedly modified the course so that it could best meet her and her students’ needs and interests.

Just as the technologies and teaching methods available changed, so did the students’ ministry contexts, which frequently served as the basis of their theological reflections. For instance, Felix explained, during his individual interview, that he preferred for students to bring their own ministry events to the course, as his own stories were “from the olden days…. I think I can bring a handful of ones that are still relevant, but they are not always.” As students’ congregational and sociocultural settings changed rapidly, many instructors viewed ongoing ministry events from the students’ contexts as an essential aspect of their course materials and assignments.

**Context: Relationships.** This context primarily related to the themes of relationships and experience. The central educational relationships were those between students and professors, as well as those between students and peers. However, instructors frequently referenced other important relationships, such as those between students and mentors, or those between students and their god. Likewise, instructors commented on the influence of their relationships with colleagues at their employing institutions, as well as with colleagues whom they had met at conferences or similar events.

**Professor-student relationships.** The benefits and challenges associated with these relationships are discussed in the relevant sections below, but it seems important to emphasize the somewhat-awkward nature of the online educational relationships between students and professors, especially the greater vulnerability for professors who recorded lectures, allowing students to view them on recorded videos while they principally interacted with students through text-mediated discussion boards or essays, as well as group videoconferences that may or may
not be recorded for future viewing. George, during his individual interview, commented on the weirdness of encountering students on the residential campus who had taken his online classes: “I have run into … [some] online students…. They have watched me in the lecture…. They greet me like a long-lost friend, and it's like, ‘Who are you anyway?’ … a funny but awkward situation.” Alistair similarly commented on the strangeness of such situations in which virtual students meet one another on the residential campus, and Howard noted recorded lectures’ longevity. Given that some professors taught anywhere from 15 to 30 students each academic term, if not more, students’ ability to view, review, analyze, and perhaps misuse professors’ prerecorded lectures seemed to tinge the online environment with a slightly greater risk than that posed in residential classrooms with spoken lectures.

**Student-student relationships.** Again, the benefits and challenges associated with these relationships are addressed in the sections below, but the characteristics of the settings that helped cultivate relationships among students seem relevant to the online classrooms’ context. The settings that professors used to create online communities resembled those on residential campuses and included keeping class sizes relatively small, ensuring that students understood the confidentiality of all remarks spoken in their online classes, and, at some seminaries, requiring students to attend back-to-back classes with the same cohort of students. Cameron, during his individual interview, explained the necessity of small class sizes, “The most you can have is six to eight in a meeting like that for an hour, and after six to eight, you really need, if you have 10 to 12, you really need, like, two meetings.” Cameron was concerned that larger groups would allow students to “hang out in the background” and not become acquainted with or “be aware” of the other students. Moreover, Alistair’s seminary, like others, required students to enroll in courses with the same cohort, or group, of students: “Our seminary requires a two-semester [set
of courses] … [so that a] relational bond is established.” Clearly, professors wanted students to develop the types of relationships with one another that their residential students formed simply by encountering one another on campus.

Additionally, numerous professors commented on their confidentiality policies, which protected sensitive information shared as part of discussions on ministry practices. As Isaac mentioned during a group interview:

Seminary-level students interact about … issues in the local church. Many of them have been through difficult transitions for leadership, so I have to give a disclaimer at the beginning, where we are going to keep these stories, these anecdotes within the group, … establishing those ground rules of confidentiality.

While students frequently were admonished to anonymize the scenarios that they chose to share in discussions, simply tracing the name of a ministry student serving in a small, rural community, or a specific chaplaincy location to the relevant social media pages could, it seems, yield enough information that could be misused by a disgruntled student or similar person. While the connectedness afforded by the Internet allows for online education, it also places students, like professors, in a somewhat-vulnerable position.

**Professors’ relationships with colleagues.** Instructors mentioned relationships with colleagues at their home institutions, as well as those whom they met at conferences and similar events. Their relationships with instructors at their employing institutions primarily help them tweak their online teaching abilities, whereas their relationships with colleagues at other institutions helped them not only with their teaching in the online environment, but also with their teaching of theological reflection. For instance, Karl explained that he and the other online instructors at his institution shared techniques that they found helpful while teaching online, one
of which included facing a camera when addressing an online student, as opposed to turning to the classroom screen, where online students’ faces were visible. As he explained in his individual interview, “We spent an hour as a faculty sharing experiences…. It’s counterintuitive … to remember that when we’re … addressing a distance student, we need to turn to the camera, not to the screen.” Therefore, Karl viewed the other professors at his seminary as a resource for improving his online courses. Relationships with instructors at other institutions helped professors not only improve their online teaching, but also their teaching of theological reflection. Felix, during his individual interview, explained that a guest speaker at a faculty meeting helped him better understand when to post comments on discussion boards without thwarting the discussion. As he stated during his individual interview, “When do I … insert my comments into a discussion forum? So, I have kind of laid back because [the speaker’s] advice is once you talk as the professor, you are the voice of authority and may stifle discussion.” Just as this guest speaker helped Felix develop his online teaching abilities, so did a colleague at another institution help Luke develop his ability to teach theological reflection. Specifically, a professor at a seminary from another ecclesial family helped Luke appreciate the importance of group discussion to balance theological reflections composed in solitude. As he commented during his individual interview, “I’ve met with several in the Roman Catholic theological education [community]… and community is part of this process because for theological reflection, while certainly there’s an individual component, they also must be in community as well.” Consequently, instructors at other seminaries helped professors overcome some of the technological glitches of online education and further helped them enrich their courses specifically on theological reflection.
**Relationships with mentors.** Many instructors also commented on a mentor’s role within the students’ current ministry context as someone to help them in their pastoral duties and, in one case, someone apart from the ministry site with whom to reflect theologically. At most seminaries, the field mentor was viewed as a person who could help the student develop a vast array of pastoral abilities that might include, but were not limited to, theological reflection.

During a group interview, Felix described the mentor’s role as, “The … mentor out in the field, I would say, is the crucial person going through the experience with them, so we are depending on that mentor … [for] every student’s development … [both] character and competency.” For Felix, and many other instructors, the mentor was someone who could help students grow both personally and professionally to achieve a host of pastoral skills. In contrast, at Elizabeth’s institution, the mentor was not part of the students’ ministry context and helped the student reflect on pastoral issues theologically. During her individual interview, Elizabeth noted that she trained mentors to help students develop their theological reflection abilities: “We are kind of practicing responding to papers…. We read a sample paper from a real student and say, ‘OK, how would you respond to this student?’” The students whom mentors supervised, thus, would “write them [their theological reflection papers] for conversation[s] with their supervisor[s].” Therefore, at Elizabeth’s institution, the mentor helped students work through difficult ministry events away from the actual ministry context by engaging in conversations around theological reflection. Regardless of the exact skills that the mentor was helping the student develop, professors viewed the mentor as a person designated to help the students in their pastoral placements.

**Students’ relationships with God.** Many of the instructors mentioned theological reflection’s role in helping students develop their relationships with God. Howard, during his
interview, remarked that he wanted to help students discern, “God’s will for their life and their calling … the tasks that God has put before them.” Ben, in his letter of advice, admonished future instructors to help students ask, “Where do I find God in this?” because “the goals of theological reflection … should be to experience God in Christ in our daily lives.” Thus, professors wanted theological reflection to help students identify their pastoral callings, as well as God’s role in the seemingly mundane events of their everyday existence. In addition to understanding God’s will for their lives and God’s role in their lives, instructors sought to help students better love God and His creatures. As John wrote in his letter of advice to future educators:

Theological reflection must aim toward the whole person, not just the head…. It must engage the head, the heart or affections, and practice…. My goal in teaching theological reflection … for my students … I hope their love and affection for God deepens as it impacts how they then love and have influence on those around them, no matter their context.

Professors clearly viewed theological reflection as a way of helping students understand the intersection of the divine in their personal and pastoral duties so that theological reflection could become not only an academic, but also a spiritual task.

Context: Experiences of professors and students. Students and professors’ life experiences also represented an aspect of the context of teaching theological reflection online. The prior life experiences of professors in ministry or missionary positions, as well as their residential teaching experiences, influenced their online teaching. For example, Karl drew extensively on his experiences as a pastor and board member of a missionary agency to illustrate appropriate and inappropriate forms of embodied theology. As he explained during his individual
interview, “Then I inevitably end up telling stories that, you know, come out of my own experience. And that actually seems to be a really helpful piece of the picture for students.” Other instructors also noted narratives’ role in their ministry experiences while teaching, and George, during his interview, characterized his teaching as “narrative-based.” Not only professors’ ministry experiences, but also their prior experiences as residential instructors influenced their teaching in the online classroom. For instance, as Isaac commented during his individual interview, he modified discussion questions used in the brick-and-mortar classroom for his online students: “So, discussion questions that worked well in an on-campus class, maybe that has to be tweaked. I have to really be selective in the particular questions that I ask.” Although Isaac needed to adapt his residential discussion questions for the online classroom, they served, nonetheless, as a springboard for developing his online courses. George, during his individual interview, similarly noted the symbiosis between his online and offline courses:

I found that I can get beyond the fact that I’m on my own in my office and talking to a screen by going on my experience. In other words, having taught the course quite a lot already, it is not difficult to generate the kind of enthusiasm I typically would have in the classroom and just to relay it right there in the recording.... If you are well-versed in doing something in the classroom, it is not all that difficult to adapt it to an online lecture.

Instructors such as George and Isaac, like others, viewed residential teaching experiences as being influential for their online teaching because their traditional campus courses served as raw materials from which to develop online courses. Thus, both ministerial and teaching experiences influenced the professors’ online courses.
The students’ ministry contexts, which often spanned a wide variety of sociocultural settings, significantly influenced the online classroom. Instructors felt that the online classroom allowed for a wider range of ministry settings to be considered and helped students focus on core theological beliefs, rather than inherited pastoral practices or popular ministry strategies. Karl, like many other instructors, viewed the kaleidoscope of contexts represented in the online classroom as one of the primary advantages of this educational venue. As he remarked during his individual interview:

Having classes available online, as well as on campus, it obviously really broadens the range of students who are able to study with us and also then you get the benefit of their wider range of life experience. I think that’s, to me that’s the core benefit is that you just [have] more people involved, and they really enrich the learning.

For Karl and others, the knowledge and experience of students serving in diverse contexts significantly enhanced the learning experience for those within the online classroom. Not only did these diverse contexts provide knowledge about unfamiliar ministry settings, but they also, according to Doug, helped students focus on core theological beliefs, as opposed to accepted customs. As he commented during his individual interview:

Best practices go out the window because best practices don’t mean anything; there is not the same best practice. Someone in Colombia who is doing ministry there, and somebody in Utah and Israel, and South Korea, and a pastor in China who leaves China every two weeks to get on the call, you know, he goes into South Korea, so it pushes them to go to the purity of what the theology doctrine scripture says, and the purity of what ministry, the core of it … and what they are discovering by engaging and having to listen and try to understand another student’s context….. They have to get to the purity of what scripture is
saying, and theology, because that’s what breaks through cultural barriers.… In many calls, I’ll [have] five different countries represented sometimes.… So, I’m saying the benefit of the international and online is for the student too. Like there, it is pushing them to a different level, which I love it.

Doug maintained that defending pastoral practices to other students serving in radically differing contexts helped students articulate the fundamental principles of their ministries in ways that may not have occurred should they have been discussing their pastoral decisions with students serving in relatively similar ministry settings. Therefore, the plethora of ministry contexts that met at the crossroads of the online classroom enriched the contexts with which students and professors were familiar and helped them more easily understand their ministry practices’ central tenets.

Sub-Question Two: Benefits

Sub-question Two asked, “How do participants describe the benefits encountered in their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?” Researchers currently do not agree on reflection’s value for professional training programs. Reflective assignments have been criticized in the fields of chaplaincy (Fitchett et al., 2015), nursing (Beveridge et al., 2014), and education (McGarr & McCormack, 2014), as well as praised in these same fields (Hatcher, 2013; Cronshaw & Menzies, 2015; Naber & Wyatt, 2014; Stahl et al., 2016). The online environment also has been criticized, for example, for leaving digital footprints (Ross, 2014b), yet praised for providing greater access to educational opportunities (Beaty, 2014). Researching the online environment is important, because online enrollments continue to increase at U.S. higher education institutions (Lederman, 2018, 2019), at least one-third of students at all U.S. colleges and universities, as well as at ATS institutions, complete at least one
course by distance (Seaman et al., 2018; Tanner, 2017), and the ATS is considering adopting online education as an accepted modality for delivering theological education that does not require prior authorization from the ATS commission as long as distance classes comprise less than half the degree program (ATS, 2019b). Because prior studies have investigated teaching theological reflection online from the perspectives of online students, rather than that of instructors (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014), clarifying the nature of teaching theological reflection from online instructors’ perspectives is both warranted and necessary. The sections below discuss the benefits of teaching theological reflection online elicited in this research – benefits that relate to the themes of experience, time, and relationships.

**Benefit: Diversity of student contexts.** Instructors repeatedly noted the diversity of contexts in which their online students were serving, as well as these diverse contexts’ benefits, which included helping students focus on core beliefs to guide ministry strategies and prepare to serve within multicultural or intercultural settings. For instance, Doug maintained that peers’ diverse settings impelled students to articulate the theological basis of their decisions. As he stated during his individual interview:

> Someone in Colombia who is doing ministry there, and somebody in Utah and Israel, and South Korea, and a pastor in China … it pushes them to go to the purity of what the theology doctrine scripture says, and the purity of what ministry, the core of it … by engaging and having to listen and try to understand another student’s context.

Doug felt that the online classroom’s intercultural milieu stimulated students to explain fully the foundations on which they were building their ministries, as opposed to glibly mentioning “best practices,” or a ministry technique popular in their locales. Karl similarly felt that the online classroom’s intercultural environment equipped his students to serve in the intercultural settings
that are becoming increasingly common in many communities. As he commented during a group interview:

There is remarkable international diversity. A class I started yesterday … [has] only eight students in it, but I think that we have five different countries represented just within that group…. The concept of a global period where Christianity is a worldwide movement, I mean, it is concretely very real…. I think it is very exciting. It really expresses the remarkable universality of the Gospel and all cultures…. I think that part of the value to the students is to be educated in that kind of diverse multicultural environment is very appropriate preparation for the kind of world that they have to minister in, you know, that they have to lead in. So, why not experience it in the classroom?

Karl appreciated the online classroom’s cosmopolitan nature because this intercultural setting enabled students to serve within diverse communities throughout the world. Given that Christianity is increasing in the Global South (Beaty, 2014), educating students in classrooms filled with believers from the cultures in which they could serve and with whom they could cooperate on joint projects seems crucial for seminary graduates’ long-term viability.

These diverse contexts not only enriched the online classroom by exposing students to a vast array of ministry contexts, but they also highlighted online education’s ability to provide access to those without other options for a seminary education. John, during a group interview, underscored cyberspace’s ability to transcend geographical spaces: “The online opportunity, it does give much more access…. It is giving access to people that may not even consider or have opportunity for certain types of education really around the world.” Therefore, the web-based classroom expanded opportunities for students who could not attend residentially and diversified
the ministry contexts with which students attending North American seminaries could become familiar.

**Benefit: Extra time.** Teaching theological reflection online also provided both students and instructors with additional time to consider remarks and also helped them develop the self-discipline necessary to structure their lives around their educational commitments. The additional time for students, as well as instructors, allowed them to find references or further information related to their comments, and this time would not have been available necessarily in the brick-and-mortar classroom. For instance, students, as Luke explained during his individual interview, could pinpoint scripture references for their written comments: “If a verse comes to mind, they don’t remember where it’s at, they can flip through the Bible. It gives them that opportunity in time.” Matthew similarly mentioned time’s flexibility as an advantage for online instructors that is not afforded to residential instructors when he remarked during his individual interview that in a “residential classroom … students are expecting something pretty quick…. Online, you have … time and space to think … [giving] a preciseness that you might not have if you’re … thinking off the top of your head.” Therefore, professors could answer students’ questions more accurately, given the lapse between questions and responses in an online classroom.

In addition to helping instructors and students obtain exact references or similar details for written discussions, the online environment also helped somewhat-shy students and instructors, as well as students who were English Language Learners (ELLs). Professors like Alistair, who were somewhat reserved in real-time conversations, appreciated the additional time afforded in the online classroom. As he commented during his individual interview, “I can take my time, not having to respond in the moment. This is one of the benefits for me as an introvert…. Not having to deliver in the exact moment is a benefit in the online world.” Alistair
felt more comfortable contributing to conversations after being given ample time to formulate his thoughts. Cameron also appreciated that written discussion boards required all students to participate, i.e., no amount of biding their time by simply attending sessions would allow them to receive credit for group discussions. During his individual interview, he commented, “In our living classes, kids will just sit there, and if they are introverts … they'll never say something…. I’ve gotten some really excellent responses … that’s a better reaction than a normal class situation.” Consequently, both students and instructors who were prone to reticence in real-time conversations benefitted from written discussions’ time-delayed nature in the online environment. ELL students also benefitted from the delay in written conversations. For instance, Luke stated during his individual interview, “An asynchronous online experience allows them more opportunity … to articulate better what they want to say … [in] a chat room…. The speed of interaction mitigates against those that [speak] English [as] a second language.” The delay in comments and replies helped ELL students better understand their peers and instructors’ remarks, allowing them to respond in a thoughtful manner that more accurately reflected their views than they necessarily could have in the rather rapid conversations that occurred in brick-and-mortar classrooms or synchronous online discussions. Thus, asynchronous conversations that often occurred in online classrooms through discussion boards or similar platforms provided somewhat-shy students and professors, as well as ELLs, with sufficient time to respond to their classmates and instructors. However, in residential group discussions, they might not have been afforded such extra time.

Time’s flexibility in online education also helped students and instructors acquire the self-discipline necessary to fulfill course requirements while simultaneously attending to their other personal and professional duties. Professors such as Karl were accustomed to preparing
course materials as the course progressed through the academic term. Preparing an entire online class prior to meeting students at the beginning of the academic term required much advance planning, as Karl noted during his individual interview:

The secondary benefit I already alluded to, and that is knowing that it’s going to be online … it enforces a level of discipline … that I wouldn’t be inclined to do without those things. You know, I would tend to wing it at the last minute…. I have found that knowing that we’re dealing with distance students … it tempers my instinct to want to wing it at the last minute. It really makes me think further ahead and more thoughtfully about what’s coming. And I think in that regard, I’m a better teacher because of it than I would be if I just walked in the classroom with a piece of paper in my hand.

Karl felt that his online students received better instruction, as the online platform required him to discipline himself and consider the entire scope of the class prior to the beginning of the academic term. Instructors also felt that their online students acquired a similar level of self-discipline because these students also needed to schedule their educational responsibilities around their other commitments. Ben, during his individual interview, commented that his online students needed to acquire the skill of “independent learning … a greater level of self-discipline in [the] online student. In some ways, it is harder. It is more difficult because you must take the bull by the horns yourself.” As online students were required to complete written discussion boards without being given a specific time to attend a group discussion, as were residential students, this helped them learn to draft and adhere to schedules and acquire the skills necessary to manage themselves and their time.

**Benefit: Relationships that foster growth.** Professors benefited by being able to witness students’ growth and learn ways to improve their online classes. Elizabeth, like other instructors,
enjoyed seeing her students develop over the course of an academic term. During her individual interview, she described her students’ transformation from unwilling participants to appreciative practitioners:

There is a benefit. I get to see the growth in students…. Some students might kind of come to it kicking and screaming: “Oh, this is a requirement. I don't want to be here.” … But what they begin to realize is this is extraordinarily valuable … [for] their lives, and the work that they are trying to do … particularly … the online students who are in the midst of ministry in various settings … and they didn’t imagine it was going to be as valuable as it has turned out to be.

For Elizabeth and others, watching students learn and develop through their online courses was one of the principal advantages of teaching online. Instructors also perceived benefits in learning ways to improve their courses through their interactions with students. As Matthew commented during his interview, online education is still somewhat like “the Wild West.” Thus, instructors such as Doug appreciated considering aspects of their courses that seemed to be most beneficial to their students so that they could retain these aspects and improve their courses for future students. As Doug explained during his individual interview, “They [students] influence me…. What’s helpful for them? What's not helpful? What kind of questions are they asking me? … What helps them really wrestle with theology and decision making, not just what they think they should do?” Consequently, not only did students grow as religious leaders through their educational relationships with the professors, but professors also improved as online instructors.

Instructors maintained that the relationships that students formed with other students helped reduce their sense of isolation and encouraged them to clarify the basis of their ministry
decisions. Elizabeth, during a group interview, described the connections that students developed with one another:

Colleagueship … is built within the group. These are folks, who over the course of nine months of communicating with one another through digital format, we use video conferencing, and I'm surprised at the degree of connection they feel among one another, even though they are separated by such great distances.

These connections formed between online students could help them deal with the sense of isolation they sometimes felt within their ministry settings. Isaac, during his individual interview, mentioned this sense of isolation and online education’s ability to alleviate it:

Most of them [my students] would be serving at medium to small churches part-time and … even in their own church context, they may feel rather isolated…. It really encourages them, emboldens them, let’s them know that there are others out there that value deep theology … equips them better.

Isaac viewed the online community that placed a high value on grounding ministry practices in theology as one of the principal benefits for students. Doug felt that the relationships among his students also prompted them to growth. As he explained during his individual interview:

The power comes from God’s Word speaking into this through the theological center of this, not just chasing after the next thing. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes they just want to go through and check the boxes…. I also see when they start challenging each other. I really look for that. Is there somebody who seems to be a little more mature around that? And I really encourage them to challenge each other because it is not just coming from teacher to them, but peer to peer. To me, that is transformational. I have seen a lot of transformation peer to peer.
Doug viewed other students’ ability to encourage their peers to root their ministry in theology as one of these relationships’ advantages. Thus, relationships among online students potentially helped offset the more pragmatic concerns found in students’ home ministry settings, which might not place as high a premium on theologically grounding ministry practices, by reminding students of others who esteemed theology and its role in everyday ministry actions.

Sub-Question Three: Challenges

Sub-Question Three asked, “How do participants describe the challenges encountered in their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment?” Professors have encountered numerous challenges while teaching reflection, such as the difficulty in fostering relationships among students (Flanagan, 2015) or instructors (Floding, Fuller, Huffaker, Parker, Rodriguez, & Louis, 2015; Roberts, 2016; Ross, 2014a, 2014b; Testa & Egan, 2015), and field settings or workplaces that do not encourage reflection (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015; McGarr & McCormack, 2014). Furthermore, the meaning of reflection remains somewhat vague (Collin et al., 2013), life experiences or personal characteristics can influence reflective assignments (Farr & Riordan, 2015; Griffith et al., 2015 Wong, 2009), and cultural differences (Murphy, 2015; Naidu & Kumagai, 2016), as well as the online environment, at times can inhibit reflective dialogue (Rivers et al., 2014). Given the limited research on instruction in theological reflection (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; Mallaby & Tan, 2018; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014; Wong, 2009, 2016a), clarifying the challenges that seminary professors encounter when teaching theological reflection online seemed both warranted and valuable. The sections below describe the challenges of teaching theological reflection online, as described by study participants, that relate to the themes of time, space, and relationships.
Challenge: Time commitment for professors and students. Instructors frequently mentioned the difficulties they experienced in devoting enough time to prepare and maintain their courses, as well as the difficulties that their students experienced in devoting adequate time to course assignments. Professors noted the difficulty of preparing materials for an entire academic term prior to meeting students. For instance, as Alistair explained during a group interview:

I walk into the live classroom, and I have the knowledge and experiences of my whole life to pull from at a moment’s notice when that need comes up. And yet in the online classroom, I have to put it all into the module where the student can experience it. The real challenge is anticipating those experiences in order for students to engage with the full force of what you need to communicate.

Creating a sufficiently robust online classroom that incorporated all relevant materials was time-consuming for Alistair, as well as other instructors. Maintaining their classes was time-consuming similarly, given the numerous ways in which many professors interacted with their students. As Cameron noted during his individual interview, “It is important to respond to people as quickly as possible in their questions…. [I] have a couple ways for people to get a hold of me…. That's crucial … reviewing what is going on online regularly.” Replying to phone calls, emails, and providing feedback on online assignments required a great deal of time. The amount of time required for online instruction contrasted with the instructors’ expectations for online teaching, as well as their prior work experiences. Alistair, during a group interview, admitted that he at first thought, “How easy can online be?” but soon realized the time commitment was at least as much as, if not more than, that required for residential teaching. Moreover, preparing an online course contrasted sharply with the professors’ prior work experiences as pastors and
residential instructors. Karl, during his individual interview, explained that as a congregational minister, he often would prepare things immediately prior to events and improvise as needed, whereas the online classroom required advance planning, “This Canvas [Learning Management System] platform … enforces a level of discipline…. I would tend to wing it at the last minute…. It’s a different rhythm for a pastor to be in a congregation.” Residential teaching also differed from online teaching because, as John explained during his individual interview, instructors could elaborate on the specifics of assignments or issues in the residential classroom, whereas in the online classroom, all materials needed to be available for students at the start of the course: “Online, you have got a certain amount of time [for] preparing things…. In person, … you can kind of talk around things a little bit more.” Instructors like John found that online teaching required a great deal of forethought and time that contrasted with their expectations for online teaching, as well as their prior experiences as pastors and residential professors.

Students similarly had difficulties dedicating adequate time to complete course assignments, given their personal and professional responsibilities, as well as the allure of almost-immediate communications in the online classroom. Students often had to juggle coursework alongside duties associated with their families, jobs, and pastoral commitments. As Matthew remarked during his individual interview, students often felt “full up,” given “their families … their careers, … [and] their ministries.” Moreover, the allure of clicking on numerous links or drafting a reply and rapidly submitting coursework sometimes hampered significant engagement with course materials, prompting instructors such as Luke to recommend purposeful fasting from technology. In his letter of advice, he commented that students should “set aside time for theological reflection,” and during his individual interview, he recommended that instructors ensure that “the efficiency of the technology does not mitigate against … genuine …
theological reflection because … the efficiency of the information technology can mitigate against just the time needed for the theological reflection.” Luke, like others, felt that the seemingly endless supply of materials online and the ability to simply click a button to communicate could cause students to be less thoughtful in their theological reflections than they would be when disconnected from technology by choice (e.g., devoting a certain amount of time to reading a specific text, albeit on a digital device) or through physical separation from technology by reading a print book. Thus, students often were distracted not only by their personal, professional, and pastoral duties, but also by the online platform that easily could cause students to engage superficially with digital materials and assignments.

**Challenge: Digital space.** Instructors described the challenges of bounding the online classroom from other familiar online platforms, such as social media sites, as well as the challenge of communicating, given that the online space retained a copy of written comments or recorded lectures. The ability to shelter behind a physical device when communicating with others in the online classroom sometimes caused students to be somewhat more abrasive than they necessarily might have been in a residential classroom. As Alistair remarked during a group interview:

> Working through case studies in an online class is what I call dealing with the Facebook effect. Social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.

The protection of a physical device emboldened students to sometimes interact with others in ways they might not have done in the residential classroom. Matthew, during his individual interview, compared this to how humans treat one another while driving in cars:
The artificial constraint of the computer, the computer screen, the keypad … online or when they’re in cars … we have trouble seeing … their humanity…. When online, we see them … kind of like machines because we’re interacting with them through a machine…. That’s the same thing we do with cars.

Instructors like Alistair and Matthew felt that the protection afforded by digital communications, in which machines mediated – and to some extent, shielded – students from others, combined with students’ experiences in forums outside the classroom, such as Twitter or Facebook, negatively influenced students’ behavior in the online educational community. Therefore, professors frequently referenced netiquette policies to offset these influences’ deleterious effects. For example, as John commented during a group interview, “This idea of netiquette … you know, let’s think the best of each other, and we are a community of learners, and here is what this looks like in an online setting.” Professors felt that reminding their students that humans were receiving their written or spoken comments in the online platform helped alleviate some of the inappropriate behaviors that students may have acquired while interacting with others on social media platforms.

Not only did other online environments, such as social media sites, sometimes inhibit meaningful conversations, but written discussions or recorded lectures’ longevity also sometimes prohibited students and instructors from interacting in the same way they might have interacted in residential classrooms. Matthew, during his individual interview, explained that while he was an online student, he felt a bit reluctant to post casual questions about course assignments, as they would remain in the online space as printed text, whereas a similar question in the brick-and-mortar classroom would have been comparatively ephemeral and have existed, if at all, as a vague memory in other students’ minds. As he commented during his individual interview:
Probably one of the difficulties with online education in that regard is if you say something in a regular classroom, the words exist only as long as they’re audible, and they exist in bits and pieces in people’s memories. Online, they exist because they’re written down…. If you type on the course chatroom, “Hey, when are we getting our papers back?” it’s hard to read the tone, and it’s always there, and you look like that guy or that gal.

The digital traces left by written conversations inhibited Matthew as an online student and now, he felt similarly inhibited those whom he instructed in the online environment from asking the types of spontaneous questions that might be asked in a residential classroom. Some instructors also commented on the difference between recorded lectures for online classes and lectures delivered in the residential classroom. For example, Howard remarked, “It is scary to fail on video because the video seems to last longer than a mistake in class … but you do it online, and it kind of lasts.” Recorded lectures’ longevity, in contrast to the passing nature of lectures delivered to a classroom full of students, made Howard somewhat more self-conscious in the online environment than he was in the brick-and-mortar classroom and may have caused him to be more guarded in his comments for recorded lectures than in his live classroom lectures. Thus, the digital footprints left by both instructors and students in the online classroom seemed to restrict the types of comments made in written discussions and recorded lectures.

**Challenge: Cultivating online relationships and conversations.** Professors also mentioned the challenge of cultivating relationships between themselves and their students, as well as cultivating relationships and conversations among their students. Professors and their students often were separated by vast expanses of space, so instructors felt obliged to forge connections with their students. As Isaac stated during his individual interview, “The distance is
real. So, trying to minimize the sense of distance by personal interaction … [trying to] foster a real personal connection and let them know that there is a vital link and care for their development.” Additionally, several instructors mentioned contacting students individually in writing or through a phone or video chat. Karl, during his individual interview, explained that he met with each of his online students through a phone call or video conference:

Each student would schedule a one-on-one appointment with me as the instructor.

With those that are distance students, we either have a private Zoom meeting or we talk on the telephone. But I’m finding that building that in as actually a requirement of the class adds a dimension of interaction, mentoring, dialogue, questions back and forth, that is really enriching.…I think that it personalizes the learning experience in another way that is good, both for the instructor and for the students. Creates more of a connection.

Therefore, instructors such as Karl and Isaac felt that simply talking with students individually helped create relationships with online students that would foster authentic conversations in their online classrooms.

Fostering relationships and conversations among students was equally difficult given the separation in time and space among their online students and the somewhat-stilted nature of written conversations. Professors encouraged students to attend other residential courses to become acquainted with instructors and their peers but felt that online students were becoming increasingly resistant to any required on-campus classes. Felix, during a group interview, noted that his seminary was “losing students” because they were requiring residential classes, such as an initial set of orientation classes at the beginning of degree programs, and George, during another group interview, commented that not a “single soul” enrolled in one of his optional residential classes despite his online classes’ popularity. Consequently, professors were left
primarily with written discussion boards and videoconferences for developing relationships and encouraging dialogue among their online students.

Although discussion boards allowed students to introduce themselves, as George commented during his individual interview, “[to describe] what ministry they might have,” these conversations’ asynchronous nature potentially limited the conversations’ quality. John, during his individual interview, explained that discussion boards’ lack of spontaneity might dampen the conversations: “Theological reflection … is … conversation … give and take … that can be difficult in terms of online because it’s not synchronous, … in-the-room conversation … [that] spurs other questions and other ideas.” The inability to interact immediately with peers consequentially could limit the significance of the issues addressed in written conversations.

However, videoconferences allowed for rapid communication that was unavailable in written conversations on discussion boards, but sometimes were difficult for students to use, given their diverse geographical locations or the technological difficulties that some students experienced entering the video conferences at the beginning of an academic term. Karl, during his individual interview, remarked on students’ difficulty in coordinating their schedules to attend videoconferences that spanned several time zones, requiring some students to participate in late-night sessions: “Depending on what time zone they live in … sometimes they’re doing it [the live videoconference] at odd hours, such as 9 [p.m.] to midnight.” The technology needed to enter videoconferences also could be challenging for some students and delay the initiation of the conversation. Felix, during his individual interview, also commented on the problems some students encountered when attempting to join a videoconference: “People have trouble getting in [to the videoconference], and it can take five or 10 minutes to get everybody in the classroom. So, there are technological challenges.” However, these technological challenges decreased over
the course’s duration, as Felix explained during the same interview: “But like any class, it is a little more difficult … but especially at the beginning of a class.” Consequently, both scheduling and technological challenges, as students became familiar with the videoconferencing platform, could limit conversations in synchronous videoconferences, and delays in communication could hamper dialogue in written discussion boards.

**Central Research Question Response**

The central research question asked, “How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment?” Prior studies focused on how the teaching and learning of theological reflection have been limited to the views of online students (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014) and residential instructors (Mallaby & Tan, 2018; Wong, 2009) or students (Wong, 2016a), whereas this study investigated the views of online instructors at several seminaries. Online theological education has increased drastically in the past decade (Tanner, 2015, 2017) and represents a method of reaching a wider group of students (Beaty, 2014; Brown, 2016; Lowe & Lowe, 2010; Graham, 2018; Scharen & Miller, 2017). Moreover, reflection, combined with mentoring relationships, has been proposed as a method of formation for future religious leaders who pursue their degrees wholly online (Brown, 2016; Graham, 2018; Hockridge, 2013, 2015), but no research has been conducted yet on the experiences of online instructors, who have facilitated such reflective dialogues. Consequently, this research sought to add their experience to the scholarly literature.

The themes of experience, relationships, time, and space, combined with this study’s three sub-questions – which concerned the content, context, benefits, and challenges of teaching theological reflection – formed the basis of the answer to the central research question about
instructors’ experience teaching theological reflection online. They experienced it as technology-mediated conversations about their own and others’ experiences and these experiences’ connection to theological beliefs. These conversations occurred primarily through discussion boards, videoconferences, and digitally communicated essays, but sometimes were augmented with phone calls or private emails to individual students. These conversations occurred principally due to their relationship with students and students’ relationships with their peers, but also involved relationships between students and their mentors, between professors and their colleagues, and between students and the divine. Relationships between students and their god helped form them spiritually, relationships between students and their mentors helped them prepare for their vocations as religious leaders, and instructors’ relationships with their colleagues helped them become better acquainted with relevant technologies and improve their teaching of theological reflection. Professors delighted in learning about their online students’ diverse settings and enjoyed seeing them develop as religious leaders. Instructors felt that students, who often felt somewhat isolated in their ministry contexts, benefitted from their relationships with other students, but noted the challenge of forging relationships with students who were separated geographically and perhaps were not acquainted with one another. Not only were relationships difficult to form, but instructors also struggled to devote adequate time to creating and managing online classes, given their prior work experiences in ministry or residential teaching, which did not require the same amount of detailed advance preparation. They felt that their students also struggled to schedule adequate time for their coursework, given their personal and professional responsibilities. Nonetheless, instructors viewed the extra time supplied through asynchronous conversations as an opportunity for shy students, somewhat-introverted professors, and English Language Learners to demonstrate their abilities in a way that
might not have been afforded them in the fast-paced communications of residential classroom discussions. Finally, professors had difficulty bounding the online educational space from more familiar online platforms, such as social media outlets that have encouraged, at times, rather abrasive or ill-considered remarks. Therefore, the benefits of conversing with those from unfamiliar contexts and watching them grow as religious leaders was offset by the challenges of dealing with the flexibility of time and students’ level of familiarity with one another, as well as the challenge of differentiating the digital classroom from the digital living quarters of social media platforms, where offhand remarks are expected and allowed.

**Phenomenological Descriptions**

Transcendental phenomenology seeks to communicate a given event’s texture (i.e., the what) and structure (i.e., the how) (Moustakas, 1994). An experience’s structure encompasses the experience’s immediate tangible and intangible entities, as well as the broader historical and social circumstances shaping the experience for the participants (Creswell, 2013; Davis, 2015; Moustakas, 1994). For this research, data analysis yielded the structure and texture of the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for a purposeful sample of instructors of online theological reflection employed by Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

**Composite structural and textural descriptions.** The structures creating the experience of teaching theological reflection online were digital spaces that helped cultivate relationships between professors and students, as well as between students and their peers, combined with time devoted specifically to educational pursuits by both faculty and students. The digital spaces were filled with course materials, such as netiquette policies designed to guide behavior in the online educational space, discussion boards and videoconferences that allowed for conversations,
and reading and writing assignments that provided background information and allowed students to formulate their thoughts apart from the group discussions. The relationships primarily were between professors and students, as well as between students and their peers, but these relationships were influenced by additional relationships, such as those between professors and their colleagues, students and their mentors, and students and their god. Professors enjoyed witnessing growth in their students and, likewise, became frustrated when students seemed to resist developing their abilities as religious leaders. Professors’ relationships with their colleagues helped them improve their techniques for engaging in theological reflection or becoming more adept with educational technology. Similarly, students’ relationships with their mentors developed their pastoral skills, and their relationship with their god helped them grow spiritually. Finally, the time allocated by professors and students varied based on their individual needs and preferences, with more introverted students and professors, as well as students who were English Language Learners, profiting from the additional time afforded by the flexibility of asynchronous discussions. Both professors and students struggled to structure their personal and professional responsibilities around the time necessary for their educational obligations.

Once the structures of digital spaces, relationships, and allocated times were created, the experience’s textures principally comprised conversations that linked personal and pastoral experiences with theological beliefs. The included experiences were those of instructors, students, and others (e.g., case studies of others’ ministries or missions) and served to help students understand that actions represented embodied theologies that spoke as loudly as, if not louder than, stated beliefs. Written conversations in spaces such as discussion boards created digital footprints that easily could inhibit communication by students, and recorded lectures that
provided background information also could intimidate professors, given the more ephemeral nature of spoken discourse in the brick-and-mortar classroom.

**The essence of teaching theological reflection online: Hospitality in cyberspace to cultivate discussions about theology and experience.** As Moustakas (1994) explained, “The final step in the phenomenological research process is the intuitive integration of the fundamental textural and structural descriptions into a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 115). This synthesis seeks to distill “that which is common or universal, the condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 115). The essence of teaching theological reflection online seems best described as hospitality in cyberspace to cultivate discussions about theology and experience. Professors viewed themselves as hosts who needed to prepare and manage the online classroom for their students so that they and the students could engage in discussions that interwove theology and experience. Professors spent a great deal of time preparing the online classroom prior to meeting with students by creating discussion boards, videoconference schedules, and affiliated course materials, and likewise exerted much effort to communicate appropriate and inappropriate behavior to students in the online classroom. Instructors frequently used netiquette policies that emphasized the humans behind the digital devices, confidentiality requirements, and the difference between the online educational space and the online social spaces with which many students were familiar. Preparing the online classroom seemed much like preparing a venue for an event.

Professors found the cyberspace venue to be awkward, given the lack of spontaneous give-and-take in asynchronous discussions, the digital traces left by written conversations or recorded lectures, and the self-discipline required of their students and themselves to dedicate
enough time to their educational commitments. Nonetheless, instructors viewed the cyber classroom as advantageous because somewhat-introverted professors or students, as well as English Language Learners, could devote extra time to their written comments, and students from a variety of sociocultural contexts could enter the online classroom because travel across physical space was not necessary to attend class sessions.

The guests for whom professors were preparing this space primarily were their students, although others, such as mentors, sometimes entered their cyber-classrooms. Professors devoted a great deal of time responding to inquiries from their students, developing relationships with their students through personalized interactions, and interacting with their students through one-on-one conversations to develop rapport or address inappropriate conduct. Professors delighted in seeing growth in their students and likewise became frustrated when students seemed to misuse the online space by avoiding learning and meaningful engagement with the materials. Professors endeavored to help their students become acquainted with one another (e.g., through discussion board introductions), given that their students may not have met one another prior to taking their classes. Finally, professors sometimes invited mentors into the online space to discuss students’ development or assist mentors in helping students grow in their home settings. Therefore, instructors seemed to feel responsible for orienting their guests (i.e., their students) to the online space and reminding them of appropriate behaviors within this online space.

After professors had prepared the online space and their students had entered the space, conversations linking theology with experience could occur. These conversations were the *raison d’être* of the online space and the attendance of the students and instructors within the space. These conversations sought to help students consider actions and contexts with theological principles so as to better embody their beliefs in their actions and included written or spoken
dialogues linking not only pastoral, but also personal experience with the role of the divine so that students could develop both professionally and personally. Performing the role of a host for conversations that integrated theology with past, present, and future actions seemed to encapsulate the experiences of the online instructors who participated in this research study.

**Summary**

This chapter began by providing cameo portraits of each of the 13 participants, then outlined the themes and subthemes derived from these participants’ responses in group and individual interviews, as well as from their written letters of advice to future theological educators. The resulting four themes of time, relationships, experience, and space then were used to address this study’s research question and sub-questions, as well as to outline the texture (conversations that integrated theology with experience) and structures (digital spaces, relationships, and time devoted to educational pursuits) of teaching theological reflection online. Finally, the texture and structures of teaching theological reflection online were combined to present the essence of teaching theological reflection online, which centered around hospitality in the online environment to nurture conversations linking theology with experience.
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. This chapter begins by presenting a summary of the research findings – including the four themes of time, relationships, experience, and space that emerged from the data – as well as the answer to the central research question guiding this research, concerning the experience of teaching theological reflection online that was reduced phenomenologically to the essence of teaching theological reflection online as hospitality in cyberspace to cultivate discussions about theology and experience. This chapter discusses these findings’ relation to the theoretical framework and highlights the usefulness of considering reflection from the perspective of Mezirow’s (1990) transformative learning theory, while simultaneously noting how my study’s findings differ from those of the empirical literature presented in Chapter Two of this dissertation, e.g., the description of theological reflection as a means for cultivating the outcomes of intercultural awareness and professional identity, but not necessarily emotional intelligence or self-efficacy. The chapter goes on to discuss the study’s theoretical, empirical, and practical implications, including the potential for clarifying the theory of reflective practice by approaching reflection from one dimension, such as theory or theology, prior to considering other dimensions, as well as diverse online classrooms’ practical potential to enrich residential classrooms. Finally, this chapter presents this study’s limitations and delimitations, then connects these to recommendations for future research, including projects involving more diverse groups of participants, then presents a conclusion to the entire research project by noting several key
findings from this research, including possible use of the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a) that emphasize “communities of faith and learning” (p. ii) as components of netiquette policies that orient students to the unique space of online seminary classrooms.

Summary of Findings

This study’s results were obtained through a transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) and comprised themes, answers to the research question and sub-questions, and the essence of the experience of teaching theological reflection online. These results are restated briefly in the sections below.

Themes

The primary themes gleaned from the data related to time, relationships, experience, and the online space. Instructors and students struggled to devote ample time to their online educational responsibilities, given their additional professional and personal obligations, but benefitted from the extra time afforded by asynchronous, online assignments, such as discussion boards. Although the primary relationships were those between instructors and students, as well as those between students and peers, an extensive network of relationships influenced the online classroom, including those between instructors and their colleagues; those among students, professors, and their mentors; and those between students and their god. The experiences discussed within the educational community included professors, students, and others’ past experiences (e.g., case studies of ministry or missions); students’ present experiences; and students’ potential future experiences (e.g., the ministry settings in which they planned to work after seminary). These experiences then were linked with theological beliefs to help the students better align their professed and operative theologies. Finally, the online spaces allowing for conversations about theology and experience were described by professors as continually
changing; difficult to distinguish from less-formal online spaces, such as social media platforms; and filled with potentially problematic digital artifacts from asynchronous conversations and recorded lectures. These themes represented the primary topics addressed in the individual and group interviews, as well as the letters of advice to future theological educators.

Research Question Answers

These themes then were used to address the study’s central research question and three sub-questions that were related to this central research question: How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment? The first of these sub-questions asked: What do participants describe as the content and context of their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment? The content of teaching theological reflection was related primarily to the theme of experience, but also was addressed in the themes of relationships and the online space. Courses on theological reflection primarily contained written or spoken conversations between professors and individual students or among professors and small groups of students that analyzed personal and professional experiences with theology. The online spaces used for these conversations included discussion boards, video conferences, or written assignments submitted to the course instructor. However, these courses’ content was changing continually as the students’ ministry settings became increasingly diverse and instructors modified their courses based on student feedback, conversations with colleagues, or technological developments. These courses’ context related to the themes of experience and relationships. The instructors’ experiences in the residential classroom, as well as their prior or current ministry settings, served as a backdrop for their courses, as did the students’ ministry settings, given that many students were involved in at least part-time ministry. Additionally,
relationships between professors and students, between professors and their colleagues, among students themselves, between students and their mentors, and between students and the divine served as contexts for the online courses about theological reflection. Consequently, the primary content of conversations integrating experience with theology was influenced by diverse contexts, including both students and instructors’ past and present experiences, as well as a complex web of relationships extending far beyond the online classroom.

Sub-Question Two asked: How do participants describe the benefits encountered in their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment? These benefits related to the themes of experience, time, and relationships. The professors repeatedly mentioned the diverse ministry contexts that were presented in the online classroom and felt that these diverse contexts equipped students to serve in the similarly diverse ministry settings of modern societies and, likewise, pushed students to articulate the theological bases of their ministry decisions, given that students’ peers would not necessarily express their faith in the same ways as they did in their home congregations. Moreover, the flexibility of time for asynchronous discussions and assignments allowed somewhat-shy professors and students, as well as English Language Learners, to express themselves in writing, facilitated finding references that might have been omitted in rapid classroom conversations, and helped students and professors develop the self-discipline necessary to schedule adequate time for their educational responsibilities despite their other personal and professional obligations. Finally, professors noted the benefit of the relationships formed in their online classrooms, allowing them to witness students’ growth and learn ways to improve their courses based on student feedback while simultaneously witnessing the decreased sense of isolation that many students seemed to experience as a result of forming relationships with their online peers. Thus, the benefits of teaching online courses in theological
reflection centered around the diverse ministry contexts discussed in these courses, combined with the flexibility of time and the creation of relationships that allowed for growth.

Sub-Question Three asked: How do participants describe the challenges encountered in their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment? The principal challenges that instructors mentioned were related to the themes of time, the digital space, and relationships. Professors had difficulty scheduling adequate time to prepare and manage online classes, as the amount of advance planning necessary for online courses contrasted with their prior experiences as ministers and residential instructors. Students similarly had difficulty scheduling their coursework around their other personal and professional duties, which included commitments to family, ministry, and secular jobs. Additionally, professors had difficulty bounding the online educational space from more familiar online spaces, such as social media sites where offhand or exceptionally blunt remarks were admissible and perhaps encouraged by machine-mediated communication that shielded senders and receivers from physical confrontations. The digital space also hampered communication, as written discussions and recorded lectures left digital traces that differed from the more fleeting nature of spoken discourse in brick-and-mortar classrooms. Finally, professors had difficulty cultivating relationships between themselves and their students given their physical separation, students’ reluctance to attend on-campus courses at any point in their degree programs (e.g., orientation classes at the beginning of their studies), time delays in written conversations, and the challenges associated with videoconferences occurring across numerous time zones that necessitated participation by at least some students at unusual times during the day (e.g., 9 p.m. until midnight). Therefore, the challenges that professors encountered concerned the amount of time required for online classes, the necessity of distinguishing the online classroom from less-formal
digital spaces, and the difficulty in creating connections between humans who were not in the same geographical location.

This study’s central question asked: How do instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools describe their experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment? This central question was answered through the above three sub-questions combined with the four themes of time, relationships, experience, and space. Instructors experienced teaching theological reflection online as digitally mediated conversations about the connections between theological beliefs and past, present, and future experiences of themselves, their students, and others. These conversations occurred primarily in the context of relationships between instructors and their students, as well as relationships among students themselves. Nonetheless, the educational space also was influenced by the instructors’ relationships with their colleagues and students’ relationships with their mentors and their god. Professors appreciated the extra time that asynchronous conversations afforded themselves if they were somewhat introverted or if they enjoyed finding detailed answers to students’ questions. Likewise, instructors felt that the extra time for written discussions benefitted English Language Learners and students who were prone to reticence in residential discussions. Instructors also viewed as advantageous the diverse mix of students and ministry contexts allowed within the online classroom, which granted greater access to theological education and allowed them to watch their students grow and develop relationships with one another to decrease the sense of isolation they might feel in their home ministry settings. Despite these advantages, instructors noted the challenge to both themselves and their students in devoting adequate time to their educational responsibilities, as well as the difficulties they experienced in cultivating relationships with and among their students. Additionally, professors struggled to
communicate to students the more formal nature of the online classroom, which contrasted with the informal digital spaces of social media or text-messaging systems. Consequently, instructors found conversations about experience and theology to be challenging to establish and maintain, but beneficial in that they allowed for a diverse group of students to dialogue about ministry and theology.

**Phenomenological Descriptions**

The answers to the research questions then were used to distill the textural and structural components, as well as the essence of teaching theological reflection online. The experience’s textures were conversations that analyzed experience with theological beliefs. These textures were created by the structures of relationships between professors and students, as well as among students; the structures of the digital spaces that allowed for asynchronous conversations on discussion boards or real-time video conferences; and the structures of time scheduled exclusively for educational responsibilities by both instructors and students. These textures and structures seemed best synthesized into the essence of teaching theological reflection as hospitality in cyberspace to cultivate discussions about theology and experience. The time that professors devoted to create and maintain their online educational spaces to allow for diverse groups of students to converse about significant ministry experiences and theological beliefs resembled the care that hosts must invest in arranging and managing venues and guests at important events.

**Discussion**

The sections below discuss how my research contributes to the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Specifically, they describe how my results show the value of considering reflection from the perspective of Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning
theory, which helps students reconsider how they ask questions about their professional experiences, rather than simply consider how they should respond to quandaries in professional practice. Additionally, the sections below discuss how my results converge with and diverge from the methods of teaching reflection outlined in prior research. For instance, the professors whom I interviewed used discussion boards and videoconferences, but preferred not to use the arts or electronic portfolios; viewed intercultural awareness, as well as professional identity, as outcomes for reflection, but did not list emotional intelligence or self-efficacy as outcomes for reflection; and described challenges associated with individual or cultural differences, difficulties in communicating through cyberspace, and concerns about authenticity, but did not comment on insurmountable technological difficulties. Finally, the sections below describe how my research extends prior studies by noting discussion boards and videoconferences’ special value in cultivating sociocultural awareness – as well as the harmful influences of informal online platforms, such as social media, in the online learning space – and conclude by outlining how my research contributes to the field of reflective practice by focusing on one dimension of reflection, such as theoretical principles or culture, when discussing the definition of reflection and presenting the voices of online instructors of theological reflection at institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, who seemed to demonstrate the type of hospitality described by Soh (2016).

Theoretical Framework

This study’s theoretical framework integrated Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory with theories of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015), as illustrated in Figure 1. Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformation through critical reflection emphasized alterations in how adults perceive experience, and such changes in
fundamental understandings of reality seem difficult to detach from future experiences. Scholars have criticized the separation of action and reflection in theories of reflective practice (Hébert, 2015; Leigh, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013), and by integrating Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) theory, I hoped to emphasize the role that transformative learning could play in understanding reflective practice in a more holistic fashion.

The professors in my research seemed to want transformation through discourse; therefore, the results lend credibility to the inclusion of Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning in discussions about educating reflective practitioners. Mezirow (1990) described critical reflection as a way to reconsider habitual methods of understanding experience:

Critical self-reflection … [is] reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting … Critical reflection is not concerned with the how or the how-to of action, but with the why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what we do (p. 13).

Therefore, critical reflection analyzes not only the interpretation of experience, but also the underlying reasons for this manner of interpreting experience and the standards for evaluating actions’ impact on oneself and others. The professors in this study also viewed their task as helping students understand appropriate ways to view ministry situations (i.e., fitting methods for framing pastoral issues or problems), as well as suitable means for evaluating pastoral actions’ consequences. For example, John, during his individual interview, sketched a discursive procedure used by many of the instructors in considering a ministry practice:

Students … do an assessment … of … [pastoral] practices, maybe … in sharing the Gospel … in ministry among their people, … [asking], “Where are they grounded biblically, theologically?” … “Is there something that needs to be kind of rethought
through or rearticulated?” … making sure we haven’t just said, “Hey is this working?” … but “Why are we doing this? Is this right? What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor for me, for my team, for if there is a church or community of believers here?” … a new set of lenses to begin to think and ask and hopefully practice in a healthier way.

John, like other professors, wanted his students to approach ministry situations from a theological, rather than a pragmatic, perspective and viewed pastoral dilemmas as opportunities for embodying theological beliefs, rather than haphazardly applying a popular ministry strategy. John’s phrase, “a new set of lenses,” resembled Mezirow’s (1990) insistence that critical reflection consider alternative methods of interpreting experience, and his use of the question, “What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor for me, for my team, for if there is a church or community of believers here?” echoed Mezirow’s (1990) concern that consequences of action on self and others be carefully considered.

Not only did the professors’ approaches to considering ministry situations reverberate with Mezirow’s (1990) theory of transformative learning, but so did their method of impelling students to reconsider their approach to responding to ministry events. Mezirow (1990) viewed discussion as one of the principal means of helping humans reframe situations to consider them from alternative perspectives: “We engage in reflective learning through the kind of discourse in which we bracket our prior judgments [and] attempt to hold our biases in abeyance (p. 10).” Such discussions could even serve, as Mezirow (1990) argued, as the disorienting dilemma that prompted transformative learning: “Perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma … death of a loved one, change in job status, retirement…. The disorienting dilemma may be evoked by an eye-opening discussion, book,
poem, or painting, or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions” (p. 14). By exposing thought processes to others’ scrutiny, Mezirow (1990) felt that humans could better articulate and solve the problems with which they were confronted. The instructors in my research also relied heavily on discussions to help students understand the foundations of their ministry actions and their overall approaches to pastoral situations. Doug, who used videoconferences to facilitate group discussions, described, during his individual interview, the types of questions and strategies used by many professors to help students reconsider ministry events from a theological perspective:

Best practices … this church … they [the students] are quoting things and I'm like …

“Where is that coming from? Where is your foundational basis?” … You are going to run out of steam…. You are going to run out of gas really quick unless you really know why you are doing this, and the power comes from God’s Word speaking into this through the theological center of this, not just chasing after the next thing. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes they just want to go through and check the boxes…. I really encourage them to challenge each other because it is not just coming from teacher to them, but peer to peer. To me, that is transformational. I have seen a lot of transformation peer to peer.

Doug, like other instructors, used not only challenging questions, but also other students’ perspectives, to impel his students to reconsider their approach to ministry. Thus, discussion, for the professors in my research, as in Mezirow’s (1990) theory of transformative learning, helped students examine their experiences and their manner of articulating ministry dilemmas.

Professors also used discourse to help students reconsider their personal lives. For instance, Ben, during his individual interview, noted that each week, he required his students to select an event from their lives, then ask themselves, “Where was God in this situation?” then write “a narrative
of how you met God today in whatever situation it is.” Ben used written discussions to help his students approach their mundane experiences from a different perspective and viewed this as essential for those entering the ministry, as it helped them understand how to help their congregations perceive God’s role in their lives as he had done when ministering to a church with nearly 3,000 members through pastoral letters connecting his parishioners’ lives to “God in the midst of everyday living.” Thus, the instructors in my study used critical reflection on personal, as well as pastoral, experiences in a manner that resembled Mezirow’s (1990) consideration of how humans make meaning of their lives through critically reflective discourse. Cronshaw and Menzies (2015) similarly viewed pastoral education with transformative learning theory and reflective practice but did so on a residential campus. My research extends the scholarly literature on theories of reflective practice by connecting pastoral education to reflective practice and transformative learning through online education at several seminaries.

**Empirical Literature**

The below sections discuss the relationship between my findings and the empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which included discussions of residential and online methods of teaching reflection, outcomes for reflection, and challenges in teaching reflection online, such as the audience’s impact, as well as how my research extends the topics previously investigated in the empirical literature and addresses gaps within this literature.

**Methods of reflection.** The instructors in my research primarily mentioned discussion boards and videoconferences as methods of facilitating reflection, whereas the empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two mentioned not only discussion boards and videoconferences, but also social media, portfolios, audiovisual materials created by students, fine arts, blogs, and simulations as ways to foster reflective practice. The professors in my research, like the
instructors in prior studies, viewed discussion boards as helpful in highlighting somewhat-shy professors and students’ talents (Enochsson, 2018; Sawrikar et al., 2015), but also noted the advantages for those who were English Language Learners in text-mediated discussions, allowing them extra time to formulate their thoughts. The professors in my research also echoed other studies’ findings in the amount of time required to respond to online discussion boards that contrasted with residential seminars (Sawrikar et al., 2015). Thus, discussion boards supplied the extra time required to better accommodate English Language Learners, as well as somewhatintroverted professors and students, but required more time for instructors to manage than residential group discussions.

The professors in my research, like those in the empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two, sometimes used structured protocols to scaffold group discussions and viewed video conferences as a way to include alternative perspectives and provide socioemotional support to those who might feel somewhat isolated in their current ministry settings. Previous scholars have noted the use of specific frameworks, such as Gibbs’ (1988) reflective cycle, as being helpful for nursing students (Parrish & Crookes, 2014), but also highlighted complicated vocabulary’s detrimental effects, such as that in Fook and Gardner (2007), which sometimes confused social work students (Testa & Egan, 2015). Consequently, the instructors in my research used sets of questions or guiding frameworks, such as those of Osmer (2008), but used a relatively small number of questions (e.g., three to four questions), worded the questions in the simplest terms possible, and seemed to use the frameworks primarily in video discussions in which they might be able to clarify, when necessary, any difficulties with terminology. The instructors in my research not only corroborated findings from other studies that emphasized the use of scaffolding for group discussions, but similarly noted conversational abilities among ministry students, many
of whom were serving in at least part-time ministry positions, to provide socioemotional support to one another, as did the students in Doehring’s (2013) text-mediated discussions. The instructors in my research – such as Elizabeth and Doug, who used video conferences, and Isaac, who used text-mediated discussions – felt that the bonds created between their distance students were one of the primary advantages of such courses for their students. As Elizabeth noted during a group interview, “These are folks who …[are] communicating with one another through [a] digital format, … and I'm surprised at the degree of connection they feel among one another, even though they are separated by such great distances.” Not only did the professors in my research comment on the value of web-based discussions for fostering connections among distance students, but they also noted these conversations’ ability to include a wide variety of students, as did prior studies, such as one involving U.S. and Macedonian teachers (Clark et al., 2016). Instructors whom I interviewed repeatedly mentioned online courses’ advantage in exposing students to those from a wide spectrum of ministry contexts. As Karl noted during his individual interview:

    Having classes available online … it obviously really broadens the range of students who are able to study with us and also then you get the benefit of their wider range of life experience…. that’s the core benefit … you just [have] more people involved, and they really enrich the learning.

Therefore, findings from my research corroborated those from previous studies that also mentioned the use of guiding frameworks for discussions and these discussions’ ability to foster socioemotional well-being and engage students from a plethora of contexts and cultures.

    Professors in my research also echoed the concerns of those involved in previous research studies about group discussions, including issues of confidentiality and scheduling.
Their classes also underscored the increasing divide between residential and online classes in that students from the two types of courses did not seem to engage with one another. The care needed to ensure the confidentiality of those being described in conversations was highlighted in prior research (Hardy, Mushore, & Goddard, 2016) and similarly mentioned by the instructors whom I interviewed. As Isaac noted during a group interview, “Many of them [his students] have been through difficult transitions for leadership, so I have to give a disclaimer…. We are going to keep these stories, these anecdotes within the group … establishing those ground rules of confidentiality.” To allow for discussions on sensitive issues, the instructors in my research, like those in previous research, reminded students of the importance of maintaining the privacy of the people involved in the situations on which they were reflecting. Just as confidentiality policies were necessary for meaningful dialogue, so were flexible schedules for students in varying time zones to accommodate live video conversations. Wilcox and Lock (2017) discussed the difficulties in arranging video conferences for students in numerous geographical locations, and the professors in my research echoed this concern. As Karl commented during his individual interview, “Depending on what time zone they live in … sometimes they’re doing it [the live videoconference] at odd hours, such as 9 [p.m.] to midnight,” and this sentiment was reiterated by numerous instructors who explained the wide swath of time zones, some of which, as in Elizabeth’s case, meant different calendar days for students residing in Australia. Therefore, videoconferences relied on students’ willingness to rearrange their other duties to be available at the right time and date regardless of their geographical location. Finally, my research reverberated with the published literature, which has featured only a handful of reflective discussions involving residential and online students attending the same institution (Cunningham, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017). Karl’s institution was the only one that fully
integrated online and residential students in group video conferences that featured distance
students on a classroom screen. While online education seems to bring together a wide range of
students in terms of geographical locations, these students rarely are integrated with residential
students; thus, the two groups seem to miss engaging with one another’s perspectives and
contexts. Consequently, the principal challenges associated with group videoconferences seemed
to revolve around protecting the confidentiality of the people discussed, scheduling difficulties,
and the bifurcation of online and offline student bodies from the same institutions.

My research diverged from the literature review in Chapter Two in that the instructors
whom I interviewed did not mention the use of social media, portfolios, audiovisual materials
created by students, the fine arts, simulations, or blogs as methods of facilitating reflection.
Williamson (2013) used Twitter to create a Twitterfall, or live stream, of responses by people
from varying socioeconomic groups and denominations to Scripture being read aloud, then asked
his students to reflect on this experience. However, the professors in my research principally
viewed social media as a negative influence that caused students to be somewhat blunter than
they necessarily would have been in residential discussions. Alistair, during a group interview,
dubbed this phenomenon, “the Facebook effect” and attributed it to how “social networking
allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look
anyone in the eye and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.” Thus, instructors
in my research viewed social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook principally as threats to
meaningful theological reflection. Just as professors in my research did not mention the use of
social media as a resource for theological reflection, neither did they mention the use of
portfolios, audiovisual materials, artwork, or blogs created by students, nor did they mention
simulated experiences as fodder for and methods of reflection. However, prior research had
discussed the uses of portfolios (Walker, 2014), videos created by students as sources of reflection (Schuhmann, 2016), artwork made by students as a method of reflecting (Cox et al., 2015), simulated experiences in Second Life as events on which to reflect (Puvirajah & Calandra, 2015), and blogs as a way of reflecting (Lockwood-Stewart, 2017). Although I did not ask professors in my research why they did not use these methods, other instructors remarked that students sometimes found portfolio platforms to be confusing (Oakley et al., 2014) and the criteria for artwork ambiguous (Klappa et al., 2017), in addition to sometimes compromising their own or others’ confidentiality on blogs (Blevins, 2015). Consequently, the methods noted by the instructors participating in my research seemed limited to text or video communications in contrast to the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, which mentioned more diverse forms of reflection, such as the arts or multimedia created by students.

Outcomes for reflection. My study’s results corroborated outcomes presented in other studies because the instructors participating in my research reiterated the value of reflective dialogue in cultivating sociocultural awareness and fostering professional identities in their students, as well as helping students link theory with practice. However, the findings from my research diverged from other scholars’ results, as the professors whom I interviewed did not mention self-efficacy and emotional intelligence as outcomes for theological reflection.

Prior studies emphasized reflection’s value for developing familiarity with other cultures, and the professors participating in my research reaffirmed reflective groups’ value in developing awareness of diverse professional settings. House and Parker (2015) commented on diverse field placements’ role in enabling their Australian ministry students to become familiar with the central role that prayer played in the lives of Christians outside their home contexts, where prayer often was treated as a somewhat-formal practice. The instructors in my research agreed
that familiarity with diverse ministry settings allowed students to become aware of the numerous ways in which theology could be expressed in pastoral practices. For instance, Doug, during a group interview, explained the value of having students from several regions of the globe connected in a live video conference:

My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel. In the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that’s now in Slovenia … and you start combining international contexts, their best practices go out the window because best practices don’t mean anything. There is not the same best practice…. Someone in Colombia who is doing ministry there, and somebody in Utah and Israel, and South Korea, and a pastor in China … by engaging and having to listen and try to understand another student’s context, … it pushes them to go to the purity of what the theology doctrine scripture says, and the purity of what ministry, the core of it … because that’s what breaks through cultural barriers.

Doug, like many of the professors who participated in my research, felt that students could better understand the manifold ways of expressing theological principles in ministry practice by listening to those who were serving in contexts radically different from the home ministry settings. My study’s findings also corroborated previous studies that emphasized the value of bringing together students serving in a variety of contexts for reflective discussions (Hardy et al., 2016; Swart, 2016). The instructors whom I interviewed similarly viewed the experience of listening to those serving in other contexts, rather than travelling to those contexts and serving in them, as in House and Parker (2015), as cultivating sociocultural awareness of the broader global community. Consequently, online reflection groups allowed students to experience, at least to a
limited degree, ministry practices from other contexts and seemed to be one of the chief advantages of web-mediated education in theological reflection.

Previous scholars also have noted the benefit of reflection in fostering professional identities that allow students to articulate their personal views on the unique ways in which they hope to embody shared professional values in their future practices, and the findings from my research corroborated those from other studies. For example, prior research has demonstrated how reflection can help nursing students formulate their personal views on caring (Schwind et al., 2015), which form a central tenet of the nursing profession. Likewise, in my research, the professors sought to help students verbalize the unique ways in which they would express their faith through their ministries. As Elizabeth explained during her interview, she wanted to help her students:

Grow in their sense of who they are in this work … their sense of themselves before God, [and] what they are doing with the communities they are serving … to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers.

For Elizabeth and other instructors, helping students understand their unique identities as pastoral leaders, as well as the beliefs that upheld these identities, formed one of the principal objectives of their courses on theological reflection. Consequently, my research, as well as prior research, portrayed reflection’s ability to help students develop a sense of their individual roles within the larger professions for which they were training.

Additionally, findings from previous studies, as well as mine, agreed on how reflection could help students link general theoretical principles to specific professional practices and situations. Scholars such as Jones and Charteris (2017) demonstrated reflection’s role in helping future teachers defend their classroom practices with ideas drawn from educational theorists.
Similarly, professors in my research repeatedly mentioned theological reflection's role in providing students with opportunities to unearth implicit and explicit theological beliefs on which they grounded their ministry decisions. As Elizabeth went on to say during her individual interview, she wanted her students “to recognize that those [decisions] are theologically grounded … to get them to recognize that there is a theological perspective that is informing how we understand the good and particular aims in our work.” Thus, instructors in previous research, as well as mine, discussed reflection’s power to help students articulate the fundamental beliefs within their profession that they were expressing as they served those with whom they interacted.

My study’s findings differed slightly from those of prior research, as the professors in my research did not mention a difference in the inclusion of theological principles in written or spoken discourse. Allas et al. (2017) explained that preservice teachers in their study were more likely to mention theory in written assignments than in spoken discourses. However, the professors whom I interviewed mentioned the integration of theology with practice in both written and spoken dialogues. John used discussion boards when working with ministerial students and explained that he impelled students to articulate the basis of their pastoral actions. As John noted during his individual interview, “When they are reflecting on not just best practices but … the moorings behinds best practices … ‘Where are they grounded biblically, theologically?’ … ‘Why are we doing this? Is this right?’” he clearly steered the conversations toward theological defenses of ministry practices in his written discussions. Doug, who used videoconferences for reflective dialogues, also focused the discussions on theology. During his interview, he said that he asked students, “‘Where is your foundational basis?’ … The power comes from God’s Word speaking into this through the theological center of this, not just chasing after the next thing.” Therefore, both written and spoken reflections, for the professors in my
research, encouraged students to integrate theological concepts into their discussions of pastoral practices. Perhaps the instructors in my research, as those in the study by Knutsson et al. (2015), carefully structured discussions so that theological principles most likely would be integrated in comments by students. Thus, the professors in my research confirmed other scholars’ findings that both written and spoken reflective conversations, when carefully scaffolded, could help students link theory with practice.

The results from my research diverged from those of other studies because the instructors participating in my research did not mention self-efficacy or emotional intelligence as outcomes for theological reflection. Khanam (2015) found that preservice teachers became more confident in their ability to speak in public and manage their time through reflection, and Katz et al. (2014) found that social work students became aware of excessively negative service users’ influence on the tone of their conversations with these users, which became more and more pessimistic as the conversations progressed. However, the instructors in my research did not mention self-confidence or emotional intelligence as outcomes from their theological reflection courses.

Elizabeth, during her individual interview, connected confidence with professional identity when commenting, “confident in who they are as ministers … a growth in their confidence and who they are and their ministerial gifts,” and Doug, during his interview, also hinted at the relationship between pastoral identity and the emotional stamina to avoid burnout when he remarked:

Where is your foundational basis? … You are going to run out of steam…. You are going to run out of gas really quick unless you really know why you are doing this, and the power comes from God's Word speaking into this through the theological center of this.
These remarks, which were ensconced in discussions on professional identity, represented the principal remarks on confidence and emotional intelligence mentioned by the professors in my research who, for whatever reason, did not remark on a link between theological reflection and emotional intelligence or self-efficacy.

In summary, my research corroborated prior studies’ findings on reflection’s ability to cultivate sociocultural awareness, cultivate a sense of professional identity, and integrate theory with practice. My study’s findings diverged from those of other studies in that theological reflection was not viewed as a means of cultivating self-efficacy or emotional intelligence, both of which seem to be viewed as aspects of professional identity for the professors in my research.

**Challenges of teaching reflection.** The instructors in my research mentioned general challenges with reflection, including individual and cultural differences, as well as concerns for authenticity that had been voiced in earlier research. However, the professors who participated in my research attributed concerns about authenticity to the time that students devoted to assignments or a disdain for education, rather than a concern that instructors or peers would evaluate their comments unfairly. The instructors whom I interviewed also mentioned challenges specific to the online platform that had been mentioned in prior studies, such as the amount of time required to create course materials and manage text-mediated discussions, as well as digital footprints’ problematic aspects in the online educational space and communication through cyberspace that sometimes hampered nonverbal communication. However, unlike prior research, the professors who participated in my study felt that digitally mediated conversations emboldened students, allowing them to shield themselves from abrasive comments’ impact, given the lack of physical contact with those within the educational community. Moreover, the
instructors whom I interviewed did not mention exceptional difficulties with technology that impaired learning, such as confusing platforms or intermittent Internet access.

My study’s results converged with those outlined in prior studies because the professors whom I interviewed mentioned general challenges with reflection related to individual and cultural differences, as well as concerns about the authenticity of students’ reflections. Previous scholars (Wong, 2009; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2018) noted that students with more professional experience often were more adept at reflection, and Elizabeth echoed this sentiment during her individual interview:

My online students … are almost … usually 100% of them … involved actively in full-time ministry. And so, thinking about the questions of theological reflection and their ministerial choices, and their leadership within a community, it is very ready.... Students online, in my experience, have been, in some ways, easier because they are very ready to talk about the issues that they are facing on a day-to-day basis. It has been harder to get the on-campus or residential students to imagine what that might be like because more and more of them have never had the weight of that responsibility directly on their shoulders.

Elizabeth verified the results of prior research that linked facility in reflection to years of experience in the profession. Moreover, professors in my study corroborated findings from prior research because they remarked on culture’s influence on reflective discussions. Wen et al. (2015) explained that Chinese preservice teachers avoided conflict by making only positive remarks about their classmates’ sample lessons, and Doug, during his individual interview, explained that students from some cultures would not contribute to group conversations if they felt that doing so would be perceived as impolite: “But there are some cultures that will just …
‘back down’ is not the right word, but they will just kind of recluse because someone else from another culture is being stronger.” Doug, later in the same interview, explained that he would contact students whom he felt had neglected to contribute to group videoconferences due to cultural politeness norms and ask them for permission to call on them individually in future videoconferences, so that their perspectives could be heard. As in prior studies, intercultural conversations’ relational dynamics required great care in managing them so that the voices of as many students as possible could be heard. Thus, individual and cultural differences influenced reflective discussions for professors in my research and reverberated with prior studies on teaching reflection.

The instructors in my research also mentioned concerns about the authenticity of students’ reflections, thereby corroborating past research studies. However, the professors whom I interviewed attributed a lack of authenticity to the time that students invested in their reflections, as opposed to a fear of judgment by instructors or peers. Scholars such as Ruiz-López et al. (2015), as well as Testa and Egan (2015), have noted that students felt uncomfortable discussing potentially embarrassing topics due to fear of judgment by instructors, and Crane (2016) remarked that students were somewhat hesitant to remark on certain subjects due to fear of judgment by their peers. Students’ reticence to discuss meaningful aspects of their practice has called reflective conversations and assignments’ authenticity into question. The instructors in my research also commented on a lack of authenticity in some assignments, but attributed this to a lack of time or a devaluing of education. Luke, during his individual interview, commented that students failed to craft meaningful reflections “because of time limitations, because most of our online students are active in ministry or something else. The tendency in that case is, some of them … just check the boxes.” Howard remarked that some
students seemed to view education as a consumer product, rather than a significant opportunity for development: “[For them], education is a commodity that’s purchased, as opposed to an experience [of] training and equipping.” Consequently, my study’s findings corroborated those of prior studies, in that the authenticity of some students’ reflections was somewhat dubious, but diverged slightly from prior research in that instructors felt that students lacked the time or appropriate attitude to contribute authentic reflections, whereas prior research attributed artificiality to students’ concerns about being negatively viewed by peers or instructors.

The professors in my research may have been able to avert fears of judgment by carefully structuring their online courses to create psychologically safe spaces. Previous studies have remarked on characteristics of online courses that help students feel comfortable, such as protecting the confidentiality of students and those whom they discuss (Hardy et al., 2016; Sawrikar et al., 2015), one-on-one conversations with the course instructor (Ruiz-López et al., 2015), cohort groups of students who attend classes together across academic terms (Powers et al., 2016), and private spaces for reflection (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). The professors who participated in my research used such methods, e.g., Isaac noted confidentiality policies’ importance during a group interview: “Many of them [his students] have been through difficult transitions for leadership, so I have to give a disclaimer … we are going to keep these stories, these anecdotes within the group, … establishing those ground rules of confidentiality.” Ben, during his individual interview, remarked that he contacted students individually to bridge the distance created between professor and student in web-mediated instruction: “I do try to have the conversation with each student on the telephone or through Zoom.” Moreover, Alistair, in his letter of advice, explained that students at his seminary completed several reflection courses with the same group of peers: “Our seminary requires a two-semester [set of courses] … [so that a]
relational bond is established.” Elizabeth, during her individual interview, noted that she saw less than half of the reflective papers that students composed during the academic year, “and then of those 12, I see five over the course of the year.” Thus, instructors in my research may have felt that their students were comfortable sharing difficult experiences, as they carefully structured the online learning environment to allow for such conversations.

The instructors who participated in my research also corroborated findings from prior studies that discussed challenges specifically associated with online classes in reflective practice. For instance, previous research has described the vast amount of time necessary to create and manage online courses (Sawrikar et al., 2015), the difficulties associated with digital footprints created in online learning environments (Brown et al., 2013; Ross, 2014b), and the lack of nonverbal cues during text-mediated discussions (Arntfield et al., 2016). The professors who participated in my research mentioned similar challenges with teaching reflection online. John, during his individual interview, commented on the disparity between the amount of time that many expected online courses to require vs. the actual amount of time required to manage these online courses: “In many ways, more time and effort [are needed] online, and to be honest, that’s not, typically, that’s not what people think when they think about online education.” Additionally, Howard, during his individual interview, commented on recorded lectures’ more enduring nature compared with spoken discourse’s somewhat-ephemeral nature: “It is scary to fail on video because the video seems to last longer than a mistake in class … but you do it online, and it kind of lasts.” Matthew, during his individual interview, noted text-based conversations’ limitations in communicating nonverbal cues: “If you type on the course chatroom, ‘Hey, when are we getting our papers back?’ it’s hard to read the tone, and it’s always there, and you look like that guy or that gal.” Therefore, the professors whom I interviewed
described challenges uniquely associated with the online learning environment that prior scholars have outlined, such as the amount of time required to develop and maintain online courses, the discomfort they felt with digital footprints left in the online educational space, and the challenge of communicating through cyberspace, given that nonverbal cues are difficult to communicate in text-mediated conversations.

However, the instructors in my research did not mention challenges with technology that severely impaired their teaching and discussed problematic aspects of communication in the online environment that diverged from prior research. Previous scholars described difficulties with technology, including complex online platforms such as electronic portfolio interfaces (Carl & Strydom, 2017; Merc, 2015; Oakley et al., 2014) and limited Internet connections for students serving in rural (Gronn et al., 2013) or international contexts (Fox, 2017). However, the professors whom I interviewed did not mention technological difficulties that significantly impaired their teaching, perhaps because they limited the technologies that they used primarily to videoconferences and discussion boards, combined with electronically submitted assignments in learning management systems, such as Canvas or Blackboard. Felix mentioned slight difficulties helping students learn to use video conferencing technologies at the beginning of academic terms but noted that these problems abated as the academic term progressed. The instructors in my research made comments that diverged from prior research, as they cited difficulties in communication related not only to the lack of nonverbal cues in text-mediated discussions, but also the deleterious influence of informal online platforms, such as social media sites, on the more formal environs of online educational spaces. As Alistair explained during a group interview:
Working through case studies in an online class is what I call dealing with the Facebook effect. Social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.

Professors felt that the behaviors that students witnessed in informal online spaces, such as Twitter or Facebook, caused them to make somewhat-brusque comments that they would not make during residential classroom discussions. Cyberspace’s ability to shield students from retributive behaviors by peers, such as glares during break times that might discourage such comments in the future, seemed to embolden some students to be somewhat less reserved in their remarks in the online educational community. Thus, the instructors in my research did not view technological challenges as a significant threat to online learning and teaching, but did view the transference of problematic online behaviors in informal platforms, such as social media, as a significant threat to meaningful online learning and teaching.

In summary, the instructors who participated in my research corroborated other studies’ findings, in that they discussed the general challenges associated with individual and cultural differences that impacted reflective assignments, as well as the lack of authenticity in some students’ reflections. However, the professors whom I interviewed, in contrast to prior studies’ findings, attributed a lack of authenticity to an insufficient amount of time, given students’ other personal and professional obligations, or to a disregard for online coursework as a meaningful experience for formation. Moreover, my study’s results diverged from those of prior research in that the professors in my research did not attribute a lack of authenticity to fear of judgment by peers or instructors, perhaps because the instructors in my research devoted a great deal of care to creating a supportive online educational community through policies on confidentiality,
individual contact with students, requiring students to enroll in courses as cohorts so that they were with the same group of peers across academic terms, and the use of reflections that remained private. The professors in my study also corroborated the results of prior scholars who described the vast amount of time required to develop and maintain online courses, the challenges associated with written discussions or recorded lectures that created enduring digital footprints, and the limited communication that excluded nonverbal remarks in written conversations. My study’s findings diverged from those of other studies, but the professors whom I interviewed mentioned the negative impact from overly blunt comments in social media in online educational communities and did not view technological difficulties as significantly impacting online learning and teaching, perhaps because they used relatively familiar online technologies, such as discussion boards and videoconferences.

The results extend prior research. My study’s results extend the “Topics Previously Investigated in the Empirical Literature,” as outlined in Chapter Two, because they show how discussion boards and videoconferences in wholly online courses can help students develop intercultural competence by presenting the unique challenge posed by the increasing prevalence of web-based communications in both formal and informal settings.

Previous scholars have described the use of video conferences to expose U.S. teachers to Macedonian teachers’ perspectives (Clark et al., 2016) and discussion boards to connect social work students serving in a variety of practicum settings (Fox, 2017). Prior research with ministry students has demonstrated the use of intercultural service opportunities for fostering increased knowledge of other cultures’ views, e.g., on prayer’s role in Christians’ daily lives (House & Parker, 2015). My study’s results demonstrate that wholly online courses with videoconferences or discussion boards can enable students to become familiar with Christian communities’
practices throughout their nations and the world. Luke explained that discussion boards allowed students to become acquainted with international contexts, such as Asian metropolitan areas, which may be somewhat more crowded than the Western settings in which they originated. As he commented during his individual interview, “In a city of 10 or 20 million ... when ... ‘quiet time’ comes up, they have never lived ... where there’s ... quiet.... That is a benefit.... Others [are] able to hear these ... situations.” Luke viewed such experiences as beneficial for his students to help them better understand the global Christian community. Similarly, Doug, during a group interview, remarked on the value of connecting students who were serving throughout the world by videoconference:

My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel; in the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that’s now in Slovenia.... By engaging and having to listen and try to understand another student’s context, ... it pushes them to go to the purity of what the theology doctrine scripture says, and the purity of what ministry, the core of it ... because that’s what breaks through cultural barriers.

Doug felt that students could better understand Christian doctrines’ manifold expressions in diverse communities simply by listening to those serving in these diverse contexts. Karl, whose institution blended residential and online students through videoconferences for group discussions, viewed online spaces’ ability to bring together students serving in areas throughout the world as one of the principal advantages of web-mediated education. As he stated during his individual interview:

Having classes available online ... it obviously really broadens the range of students who are able to study with us and also then you get the benefit of their wider range of life
experience…. That’s the core benefit … you just [have] more people involved, and they really enrich the learning.

Given theological education’s increased focus on intercultural awareness (ATS, 2019c), online platforms such as discussion boards and videoconferences may be helpful in familiarizing not only online students, but also residential students with contexts beyond those within their local communities.

My research also extends prior scholarly literature, as it describes the influence of informal online spaces, such as social media, on the more formal online learning environment – an influence that sometimes can be detrimental. Although prior studies described the difficulties of communicating through text in cyberspace (Arntfield et al., 2016), many of the participants in my research felt that students inadvertently may have acquired less-than-desirable habits from rather ill-considered remarks they have viewed on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. For instance, Alistair, during a group interview, remarked on how online communication provided students with a sense of safety from the ill consequences normally attending inappropriate conduct. He labeled this phenomenon “the Facebook effect” and explained that “social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.” Therefore, for the professors in my research, not only the lack of nonverbal cues, but also the immunity from social ostracization associated with web-based interactions, prompted students to make rather-brusque or blunt remarks, especially given that many students were completing their degrees wholly online. Such uncharitable comments seem especially problematic given the increased focus on structuring theological education schools as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. v).
The results contribute to the fields of reflective practice and theological education. My study’s findings also contribute to the field of reflective practice and the discipline of theological education in the wholly online environment, as outlined in “Literature gaps” in Chapter Two, by presenting a way to approach reflection from one aspect of it (e.g., theology) prior to considering the other dimensions of a given reflective model (e.g., culture or emotions) and by giving voice to online instructors of theological reflection, who are underrepresented in the current empirical literature.

Previous scholars have discussed the lack of a clear definition of reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Rose, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013; Wilson, 2013), and this ambiguity may be related to the numerous concerns that professionals must consider when reflecting on issues such as theory (Ryan, 2015); theology (Thompson et al., 2008), which can be viewed as somewhat analogous to theory for religious leaders (Wong, 2016); culture (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995); prior experiences (Stackhouse, 2008); and emotions (Gibbs, 1988; Killen & De Beer, 1994). The instructors whom I interviewed did not have difficulty describing theological reflection, a finding that is reassuring, given theological reflection’s continued importance as a guiding principle of theological education (ATS, 2019c). Elizabeth, during her individual interview, defined theological reflection as the process of unearthing implicit beliefs or inferring beliefs from practice settings:

My objective with them was to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers and the choices that they make and the decisions in that, and also to recognize that those are theologically grounded, whether they are aware of it or not…. The challenge is how do you get people to recognize that their choices are theologically grounded? … We [are] trying to unpack the theological vision that’s already in place in
your head and also to tease out what might be the theological vision of other ministers or settings through evidence they might see in front of them. So, what does the space … communicate [about] what they believe about the person of Jesus Christ? What does it say? What does the space in a parish and the way you experience hospitality there say about what it means to be church? To get students to unpack those kinds of things … to get them to recognize that there is a theological perspective that is informing how we understand the good and particular aims in our work.

For Elizabeth and other instructors, theological reflection’s overall purpose was to excavate theological beliefs manifested in their actions or professional experiences. The theoretical framework from which I approached my research (Figure 1) integrated Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory, as Collin et al. (2013) recommended approaching reflection with theories other than those commonly employed, such as Dewey (1933) or Schön (1983). The inclusion of Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory seemed especially suited to the type of identity work with which Elizabeth and the other professors were involved when helping students articulate their operative theologies. Other fields, such as healthcare or education, may want to label specific types of reflection to help students focus on theory, emotions, cultural settings, or similar concerns so that they appreciate the different perspectives from which they can consider professional practice.

My research contributes to the discipline of theological reflection by presenting the views of instructors teaching theological reflection in the wholly online environment. Reflective practice in the fields of healthcare and education has been investigated extensively, as evidenced by the literature reviews available for subfields within these disciplines. These include literature reviews on instruction in reflection for future physical education teachers (Standal & Moe,
2013), music teachers (Lindroth, 2015), math and science teachers (Saylor & Johnson, 2014),
teachers of English as a Second Language (Farrell, 2016), nurses (Bulman et al., 2014), and
pharmacists (Tsingos et al., 2014).

Previous studies on teaching theological reflection have been limited to students’
perspectives as presented in online journals (Doehring, 2013), on discussion boards (Hatcher,
2013), and in transcripts of chat-room sessions, in which students role-played pastoral counseling
sessions (McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014), as well as general learning perceptions, to be
reflective, as described by residential undergraduate students (Wong, 2016a). These studies were
restricted to students attending single institutions, whereas my research presents the views of
professors at multiple ATS-accredited institutions. Furthermore, the fully online environment is
underrepresented in the current literature on reflective practice, as demonstrated in Table 1.
Consequently, my study allows the voices of professors of theological reflection who teach in the
wholly online environment to be presented in the scholarly literature.

The instructors in my research seemed to view themselves as hosts for conversations
about theology and experience, exhibiting the four aspects of hospitality described by Soh
(2016): “(1) inclusion; (2) presence; (3) care; and (4) reciprocity” (pp. 204–205). The professors
in my research repeatedly remarked on the numerous contexts and locations in which their
students were serving. As Doug noted during a group interview, “My [video] call yesterday was
with a student in Israel; in the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah,
Washington, and then one that’s now in Slovenia.” The representation of the global Christian
community was an aspect of online teaching that many welcomed and seemed to enjoy.
Likewise, the instructors in my research truly seemed to want to be present for their online
students just as they were with their residential students in the classroom by their bodily
presence. As Cameron remarked during his individual interview, “It is important to respond to people as quickly as possible in their questions…. [I] have a couple ways for people to get a hold of me…. That's crucial … reviewing what is going on online regularly.” Cameron, like many of the professors in my study, was willing to email, call, or videoconference with students to address their individual concerns. Additionally, the professors whom I interviewed sought to communicate a genuine concern for their students. As Isaac explained during his individual interview, “The distance is real, so trying to minimize the sense of distance by personal interaction … [trying to] foster a real personal connection and let them know that there is a vital link and care for their development.” Like Isaac, several professors remarked on how they sought to demonstrate to students that they were concerned about their growth and development through their words or actions (e.g., calling them individually to become better acquainted with them and their educational needs). Finally, the instructors who participated in my research demonstrated reciprocity by showing appreciation for how students’ diverse ministry settings enriched the learning environment. For instance, Karl asked a student serving in Southeast Asia to make a presentation on his ministry context for the other students as part of a group discussion:

In another class I had, I was wanting to talk about the dynamics of Christian witness and mission in South Asia in India, which of course is … very complex in origination, so it’s hard to generalize. But there was a student in my class who actually is from India, had served as a pastor there, and so I invited him to take about half the morning and to talk about his own experience, and to give a lot of perspective on the Indian context that he had more expertise in it by far than I did.

Despite his five decades of experience in ministry and several years of service in missions organizations, Karl demonstrated to his students that they were more informed on certain issues
than he was, and that he was willing to admit this publicly by letting them teach portions of the class. Soh’s (2016) research, in which neither students nor professors were interviewed, found that theological education often was filled with “cold professionalism” (p. 259). However, the professors in my study may have been better equipped to demonstrate hospitality, as all but five had served in international contexts or organizations for several years prior to entering higher education, and of these five, one currently has been involved in the hospitality industry as part of a family business venture, and one had worked in a program seeking to train people who were incarcerated to become religious leaders. Therefore, most of the professors in my research had engaged in the types of experiences Soh (2016) recommended for those seeking to improve their ability to provide hospitality in the classroom: “Theological educators can experience intentional marginality by ... living in a foreign land for a period of time ... listen[ing] closely to those who have experienced life at the margin " (pp. 214–215). Therefore, the instructors in my research seemed especially equipped to provide hospitality and seemed to exercise great care in doing so in the wholly online environment.

The above sections discussed the relationship between the results from my research and the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. Specifically, they described how my results confirmed the value of considering reflection from a framework that included Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory, as well as methods of teaching reflection surveyed in prior research that the instructors whom I interviewed did and did not use. For example, the instructors in my research mentioned using discussion boards and videoconferences but did not mention using the arts or electronic portfolios to facilitate reflection. Likewise, the above sections discussed the outcomes that the professors participating in my research discussed – which were listed in prior studies, such as sociocultural awareness, professional identity, and
the integration of theory with practice – but similarly noted the outcomes that were discussed in prior studies, but not utilized by the instructors whom I interviewed, including emotional intelligence and self-efficacy. Moreover, the above sections described the challenges mentioned by the participants in my research that had been described in prior studies, including individual and cultural differences, authenticity concerns, and the difficulties in communicating through digital media, but also noted that the professors in my research did not mention exceptional challenges with technology, as had participants in previous studies. Additionally, the above sections explained how my results extended prior research by demonstrating the unique way in which discussion boards and videoconferences can help future religious leaders become familiar with diverse ministry settings and the increasing difficulty of bounding the online classroom from informal online platforms, such as social media. Finally, the above sections highlighted my study’s contribution to the field of reflective practice by presenting a way to consider reflection from one perspective (e.g., theory or culture) before moving on to another perspective, a process that may help clarify reflection’s ambiguous nature, as well as my study’s value in providing others with access to the voices of 13 professors who teach theological reflection online at multiple institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools and who seemed to demonstrate the type of hospitality described by Soh (2016).

Implications

The primary theoretical implication of my research is that theorists, researchers, and instructors may want to approach reflection on theory or theology from the perspective of Mezirow’s (1990) transformative learning theory, specifically his description of “critical reflection” (p. 13), which involves examining beliefs and the consequences of actions. My study’s principal empirical implications are that instructors can foster sociocultural awareness in
their students, given the diversity of contexts in which students are situated, but that doing so is challenging, as students are interacting through cyberspace, which can offer a shield from the costs associated with inappropriate social conduct and can cause miscommunication, given the lack of nonverbal cues in written conversations. Finally, my findings’ principal practical implications are that instructors may want to view theological reflection as an aspect of identity formation, given its close association with Mezirow’s (1990) critical reflection, to blend residential and online students in group conversations to facilitate cultural competence, and to view themselves as hosts who cooperate with students to foster classrooms that are “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii).

Theoretical Implications

For my research, I chose to integrate the theory of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) with transformative learning theory (Mezirow; 1990, 1991) because the theory of reflective practice repeatedly has been criticized for separating thinking and acting (Collin et al., 2013; Gelfuso & Dennis, 2014; Hébert, 2015; Leigh, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013). By integrating Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory with the theories of reflective practice, I hoped to help bridge the divide between thought and action, as the transformation of worldview perspective or the fundamental premises of practice seem difficult to compartmentalize routinely and neglect during action. Dewey (1933) focused on the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 6), while Schön (1983) and van Manen (2015) focused on responding to a given professional decision (e.g., considering the positioning of windows to facilitate the use of natural sunlight when designing an elementary school or determining the appropriate gesture or tone for a given group
of students). For van Manen (2015), these choices were ethical choices because “pedagogy poses the ethical demand of instantly distinguishing what is good from what is not good or less appropriate in dealing with children or young people” (p. 187). In contrast, Mezirow (1990) focused on helping individuals recognize the beliefs with which they were interpreting experience through critical reflection:

Critical self-reflection … [is] reassessing the way we have posed problems and reassessing our own orientation to perceiving, knowing, believing, feeling, and acting…. Critical reflection is not concerned with the how or the how-to of action, but with the why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what we do (p. 13).

By unearthing these fundamental premises and comparing them to others’ perspectives, Mezirow (1990, 1991) felt that adults could respond more appropriately to and interpret their experiences. Because Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) theory of transformative learning helps students articulate and examine their core beliefs, which are difficult to set aside systematically when responding to professional situations, I integrated his theory with the theory of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) in an attempt to diminish the gap between thought and action, often criticized in theories of reflective practice.

The participants in my research, all of whom taught theological reflection online, lend credibility to the integration of Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) theory with that of reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; van Manen, 2015) within higher education institutions. The professors whom I interviewed sought to help students excavate the theological beliefs by which they were making ministry decisions to help them create a pastoral or professional identity and a set of beliefs by which to judge their ministry decisions’ appropriateness. Elizabeth, during her individual interview, explained that she wanted to help her students recognize that they were
acting on a set of beliefs even if they had not articulated and acknowledged these beliefs necessarily:

My objective with them was to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers and the choices that they make and the decisions in that, and … to recognize that those are theologically grounded, whether they are aware of it or not … to unpack the theological vision that’s already in place in your head.

Elizabeth’s description of theological reflection’s purpose resembled Mezirow’s (1990) premise reflection, in which individuals consider “the why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what we do (p. 13), reverberating with Dunne’s (2005) insistence that professional fields not be made “practitioner-proof” (p. 375) to allow for the expression of unique professional beliefs and characteristics within the larger spectrum of accepted professional standards, as well as the Association of Theological Schools’ renewed focus on student formation (ATS, 2019a), given core beliefs’ role in personal and professional identities (Manuel & Dutton, 2019). Furthermore, instructors felt that perceiving the theological basis of their ministry decisions was transformative for some students and offered them a set of guidelines by which to judge their decisions’ ethicality. Doug, during his individual interview, remarked on group discussions’ ability to impel students to identify their operative theologies and how this changed students’ perceptions of ministry quandaries:

The power comes from God's Word speaking into this through the theological center of this, not just chasing after the next thing. Sometimes it is hard. Sometimes they just want to go through and check the boxes…. I also see when they start challenging each other … and I really encourage them to challenge each other because it is not just coming from
teacher to them, but peer to peer. To me, that is transformational. I have seen a lot of transformation peer to peer.

The transformation that Doug seems to be referring to is the change in acting on stated theological beliefs, rather than ministry trends. John, during his individual interview, also commented on the “new set of lenses,” or transformative impact of guiding theological beliefs, and further linked these beliefs to understanding ministry decisions’ consequences and ethicality.

As he stated during his individual interview:

Are we making sure we haven’t just said, “Hey, is this working?” … but, “Why are we doing this? Is this right? What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor for me, for my team, for if there is a church or community of believers here?” … “If we do this, if I do this, what is it saying? Not only about us; what is it saying about the Lord?”

John’s question, “Is this right?” echoed van Manen’s connection of reflection to ethical concerns, and his question, “What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor,” resembled Mezirow’s (1990) definition of critical reflection as considering beliefs, then “the consequences of what we do” (p. 13). Consequently, interweaving Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory and the theory of reflective practice seems helpful in understanding the formation and transformation of reflective practitioners within seminary communities.

**Empirical Implications**

This study’s results provide empirical evidence that online instruction in theological reflection can achieve outcomes such as sociocultural awareness and professional identity, which are central tenets of the proposed new Association of Theological Schools standards (ATS,
and overcome challenges associated with online communication that potentially harm the “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) that the proposed new standards seek to cultivate in seminary classrooms. Furthermore, my study’s results provide a way to view reflection from one dimension, such as theory or theology, prior to moving on to other aspects or types of reflection (e.g., cultural, ethical, or emotional reflection, which focuses on concerns associated with these individual dimensions of reflective models).

The online environment is becoming increasingly important within ATS schools as the proposed new standards consider online instruction as an accepted delivery mode and require residency only for PhD programs, but still allow for exceptions to be made, even for doctoral students, should the school be able to provide synchronous communication options between doctoral students and faculty (ATS, 2019a, Standard 5.18; ATS, 2019b, IV.F.1). My study’s findings supply evidence that this “culture shift” (Yamada, 2019, p. 1) is warranted as long as institutions follow Yamada’s advice to focus on “principles of quality” (p. 2) regardless of delivery mode. Such research is needed desperately, given the paucity of research on reflection in the wholly online environment (Table 1) and the restriction to the voices of online students in prior studies on theological reflection (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014).

The proposed new ATS standards rightly place an increased emphasis on cultural competence, given Christianity’s migration to the Global South (Beaty, 2014), as evidenced by Standard 3.3, which states, “The school demonstrates cultural competency in student learning and formation by helping students understand, respect, engage, and learn from diverse communities and multicultural perspectives, inside and outside the classroom” (ATS, 2019a, p. 3). My study’s results demonstrate that online instruction in theological reflection, according to
the instructors who participated in my research, can help students cultivate sociocultural awareness by exposing them to perspectives that differ drastically from those within their home communities. Luke, who used text-based discussions with his online students, remarked, during his individual interview, about the benefit of having students understand the diverse meanings of “quiet time,” depending on their context, given that some of his students were located in large Asian cities where silence and solitude were sometimes difficult to obtain. Likewise, Doug, during a group interview, remarked on online classrooms’ ability to bring together students scattered worldwide: “My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel; in the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that’s now in Slovenia.” The professors whom I interviewed repeatedly remarked on the benefit of bringing together students from diverse locations, yet only Karl’s institution fully integrated online and residential students. Although online education seems to bring together the diaspora of distance theological students, these students rarely are integrated into conversations involving residential students, which potentially may limit residential theological students’ intercultural awareness. To be fair to theological schools, only two studies that I reviewed in Chapter Two (Cunningham, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017) brought together online and residential students, and sadly, Cunningham (2014) simply chose to move the entire class online, and her residential students vociferously protested over the technological difficulties involved in integrating distance students connected through iPads into their residential group discussions. Consequently, my study’s results confirm that sociocultural awareness can be cultivated in online classrooms, but that rarely are the richly diverse online classes integrated with residential classrooms. Such a bifurcation may become an increasing concern as students inside and outside the U.S. choose to
attend schools virtually or residentially from other parts of the world (National Association of Foreign Student Advisers, 2019; Redden, 2018).

The professors whom I interviewed also felt that online instruction in theological reflection helped students develop their professional or pastoral identities. The proposed new ATS standards emphasize student formation in the third standard, which reads, “Theological schools are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation” (ATS, 2019a, p. 5). Therefore, theological education is to be focused primarily on modeling and shaping students who are confident in their values and have the abilities necessary to express these values appropriately in their professional contexts. The professors who participated in my research viewed theological reflection as helpful in impelling students to articulate the values by which they were making decisions. As Elizabeth, who used videoconferences with her students, stated during her individual interview, “My objective with them was to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers and the choices that they make and the decisions in that, and … to recognize that those are theologically grounded, whether they are aware of it or not.” The close relationship between core theological beliefs and pastoral or professional identity also was mentioned by Hatcher (2013) in her research on text-mediated discussions for online ministry students. Therefore, my study’s results demonstrate that online courses in theological reflection can help seminaries achieve one aspect of students’ formation: the development of a pastoral or professional identity. Doug, during his individual interview, remarked on the importance of such an identity in avoiding burnout when he commented, “Where is that coming from? Where is your foundational basis?” … You are going to run out of steam…. You are going to run out of gas really quick unless you really know why you are doing this,” and Chen (2020) empirically verified that pastors with a greater sense of calling or professional identity reported
less burnout on a quantitative survey. Given the high degree of burnout among clergy (Adams et al., 2016; Elkington, 2013), as well as the emphasis on formation of religious leaders requested by communities of faith (Wong et al., 2019), such identity development seems essential for creating groups of students who will serve communities of faith for many years.

Although online courses in theological reflection can help students become aware of other cultures and develop professional identities, these courses also can pose difficulties for instructors, given the unusual nature of online communication, in which people may never meet face-to-face and where digital footprints are created that are much more lasting than spoken words or nonverbal interactions that occur in residential classes. My study’s results provide evidence of these difficulties and the threat that they present to creating online “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) that are referenced in all 10 of the proposed new ATS standards. Previous studies with medical students documented the difficulties of communicating via text through cyberspace, given the absence of nonverbal cues, such as body language (Arntfield et al., 2016), and my study’s results verify these difficulties, but attributed them not only to the lack of nonverbal cues, but also to the false sense of security presented through machine-mediated communication that eerily resembles the aura of invincibility intoxicating some reckless drivers of large vehicles. Felix, during his individual interview, mentioned “body language,” and Matthew, during his individual interview, referenced the lack of nonverbal cues, such as “tone,” in written communications. However, Alistair, during a group interview, attributed inappropriate conduct to behaviors acquired in informal online spaces, such as social media platforms, and dubbed this, “the Facebook effect” as “social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.” Because many online students
most likely will face few, if any, serious repercussions for making needlessly blunt comments on a little-known, sparsely populated Facebook group home page, they inadvertently may transfer this less-than-desirable habit to the online classroom. The increasing prevalence of online communications with humans whom we most likely never will meet face-to-face (e.g., chat sessions with customer service representatives or written comments to those in interest groups on social media) seems to embolden some to behave in somewhat-inappropriate ways in the online classroom and provides empirical evidence that supports seminaries’ renewed focus as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii), where beliefs influence not only learning, but also behaviors.

Another threat to meaningful interactions within the online classroom has been the more enduring nature of written conversations or recorded lectures that leave digital footprints, in contrast to the somewhat-ephemeral nature of spoken dialogue in residential classrooms. My study’s results supply empirical evidence that corresponds with the proposed guidelines developed by the ATS (2019a) in Standards 7.7 and 10.9, concerning the privacy of student information and all online course materials. Ross (2014a, 2014b) voiced students’ concerns over privacy in the online environment, and Matthew, during his individual interview, echoed this concern by relating his reluctance to post online comments in course chatrooms while he was an online student: “If you say something in a regular classroom, the words exist only as long as they’re audible, and they exist in bits and pieces in people’s memories. Online, they exist because they’re written down.” Furthermore, the instructors in my research discussed the challenges of providing students with recorded lectures because, as Howard remarked during his individual interview, “It is scary to fail on video because the video seems to last longer than a mistake in class … but you do it online, and it kind of lasts.” The digital artifacts created within
online classrooms seem to make students and professors somewhat more reticent or guarded than they necessarily would be in residential classrooms and provide empirical evidence for the need to formulate and conscientiously apply policies on digital privacy carefully.

Despite the challenges associated with online communications, the professors in my research were able to overcome these difficulties by purposefully protecting the online community through policies referenced in prior studies, such as confidentiality guidelines (Hardy et al., 2016); one-on-one conversations with students, either to cultivate rapport or address individual concerns (Ruiz-López et al., 2015); requiring students to attend classes as cohorts (Powers et al., 2016); and allowing private spaces for reflection (Pretorius & Ford, 2016). By engaging in practices that resembled those of hosts helping guests feel welcome at events (Soh, 2016), the instructors in my research created online classrooms in which students felt connected with one another and comfortable discussing challenging ministry issues. Isaac, during his individual interview, remarked on this sense of connection:

Most of them [my students] would be serving at medium to small churches part-time and … even in their own church context, they may feel rather isolated…. It really encourages them, emboldens them, lets them know that there are others out there that value deep theology … equips them better.

Other instructors similarly remarked on this sense of connection that was developed among their students through their interactions in cyberspace, and my research provides empirical evidence that despite these challenges, meaningful online “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) can be developed with sufficient care and planning. Perhaps by demonstrating to students that cyberspace can provide hospitable spaces for people of faith, professors can equip their students to develop digital communities that enrich physical communities of faith, as in
Russell’s (2016) virtual provision of spiritual care for those who could not attend a physical church.

Finally, my research provides empirical evidence of the potential usefulness of focusing on one aspect of reflection prior to considering the other aspects. The instructors whom I interviewed did not have difficulty presenting a purpose for theological reflection and seemed to agree on the general definition supplied by Elizabeth during her individual interview:

My objective with them was to help them become more self-aware of who they are as ministers and the choices that they make and the decisions in that, and … to recognize that those are theologically grounded, whether they are aware of it or not…. So, what does the space … communicate [about] what they believe about the person of Jesus Christ? What does it say? What does the space in a parish and the way you experience hospitality there say about what it means to be church?

For Elizabeth and others, theological reflection’s purpose was to unearth the theological beliefs guiding pastoral decisions. In prior studies, reflection was presented as an ambiguous concept (Beauchamp, 2015; Clarà, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Eaton, 2016; Gerhardt, 2013; Nguyen, Fernandez, Karsenti, & Charlin, 2014; Rose, 2016; Thorsen & DeVore, 2013; Wilson, 2013). While theological reflection models vary concerning the emphasis they place on culture (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995) or emotions (Killen & De Beer, 1994), all models for theological reflection seem to include the role of tradition or theology as a core principle. Perhaps by being clearer on which aspect of practice is being considered (e.g., culture, emotions, or theory), instructors can better equip students to understand reflection’s purpose. Theological reflection remains a guiding principle of theological education within ATS schools. The 10 educational principles that “served as a foundation for their [the ATS Commission’s
redevelopment] work, and now help serve as an interpretive framework for the proposed standards” (ATS, 2019c, p. 1), explain, through the first principle, that “graduate theological education embodies a community of faith and learning that is guided by a theological vision and that cultivates habits of theological reflection” (ATS, 2019c, p. 1). Furthermore, reflection remains a core focus of the MDiv program, as outlined in proposed Standard 4.3: “The Master of Divinity degree … has clearly articulated learning outcomes that address … religious and public leadership, including cultivating capacities for leading in ecclesial and public contexts, and reflecting on leadership practices” (ATS, 2019a, p. 5). Therefore, my research may help researchers clarify reflection’s somewhat-ambiguous nature by focusing on one aspect of reflection, such as culture or theory, when investigating instruction in reflective practice. Such clarification would be beneficial, given the abiding importance of reflection across the helping professions (ANA, 2015; ATS, 2019a; CAEP, 2018; NASW, 2012; NCATE, 2008).

In summary, my study’s results provide empirical support for the use of online courses in theological reflection as opportunities to cultivate sociocultural awareness and professional identity while acknowledging the difficulties in creating hospitable online communities, given the false sense of security created through digitally mediated communication, as well as the rather uncomfortable nature of written or recorded discourse, which leaves digital footprints within the online classroom. Nonetheless, the instructors in my research were able to overcome these challenges by carefully nurturing relationships among students and between themselves and students to create a community that supplied socioemotional support to students who may have felt somewhat isolated in remote or unsupportive communities. Finally, my study’s results lend credence to the possibility of considering reflection piecemeal, at least within training
programs, so that students better understand the focus of their thinking on one aspect of practice, such as theology, theory, emotions, or culture.

**Practical Implications**

This study’s results imply that instructors and theorists may want to consider theological reflection, as well as its analog in other helping professions, reflection on the relationship between practice and theory, as an aspect of premise reflection, as articulated in Mezirow’s (1990, 1991) transformative learning theory and as an aspect of identity formation. Additionally, my study’s results suggest that administrators may want to provide sufficient technological resources for blended online and residential classrooms and instructors, and when possible, may want to integrate the sociocultural diversity found within online classrooms with residential courses to achieve the cultural competence highlighted in the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a), while simultaneously offsetting the potentially detrimental impact of mediated communication by viewing themselves as hosts for online discussions (Soh, 2016) who orient their students toward the bounded space of seminary classrooms as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii).

The instructors whom I interviewed seemed to view theological reflection as premise reflection, in which students were engaging in Mezirow’s (1990) “Critical reflection [that] is not concerned with the how or the how-to of action, but with the why, the reasons for, and the consequences of what we do” (p. 13). For instance, John, during his individual interview, remarked that he wanted students to appreciate the theological basis of their ministry decisions, as well as these decisions’ impact on those they served, when he described the questions that he used with his students: “Where are they grounded biblically, theologically? … What does this do in terms of reflection upon love of God and love of neighbor? … What is it [the ministry
practice] saying about the Lord?” Requiring students to articulate their ministry choices’ theological foundations and these ministry decisions’ effects on those whom they served aligns with Mezirow’s (1990) two characteristics of critical reflection: “the reasons for and the consequences of what we do” (p. 13). Not only did the participants in my research seem to view theological reflection as premise reflection, but they also used methods listed by Mezirow (1990) to foster reflection and transformation: “Perspective transformation occurs in response to an externally imposed disorienting dilemma … an eye-opening discussion … or by one’s efforts to understand a different culture that challenges one’s presuppositions” (p. 14). The professors whom I interviewed used text or video discussions with diverse groups of students to foster reflection on the basis and implications of ministry practices and repeatedly remarked on the incredible variety of student settings as being a benefit of the wholly online environment. These diverse perspectives impelled students to articulate the core beliefs by which they were making ministry decisions, and such articulation could be viewed as an aspect of identity formation (Illeris, 2014; Manuel & Dutton, 2019) that would help instructors fulfill their overall purpose as part of “theological schools [that] are communities of faith and learning centered on student learning and formation” (ATS, 2019a, p. 5). Therefore, instructors in seminaries, as well as other professional schools, may want to view theological reflection, as well as reflection on the connection between theory and practice, as an aspect of identity formation that requires interaction with those from diverse settings and articulation of core beliefs about pastoral or professional practice.

Because online courses in theological reflection often were filled with students serving in diverse sociocultural contexts, administrators may want to supply the necessary resources for linking online and offline classrooms, and instructors may want to integrate online student
groups with residential classrooms, for instance, through digital projection of distance students linked through videoconferencing platforms such as WebEx or Zoom, while simultaneously protecting this potential for cultural diversity by facilitating Internet access for students serving in countries governed by regimes that sometimes block Internet sites. The proposed new ATS standards rightly emphasize the importance of cultural competence (ATS, 2019a, Standard 3.3), given the growth of Christianity in the Global South and resulting diversity within communities of faith in North America and Europe (Beaty, 2014; Catto, 2017). Such competence could be nurtured by bringing together, when possible, online and offline students for group discussions on ministry practices. Doug, during a group interview, listed the numerous contexts in which his students were serving when he commented, “My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel; in the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that’s now in Slovenia.” Allowing residential students to become familiar with their online peers’ contexts, and also enabling online students to learn about their residential counterparts’ ministry settings, seems beneficial for cultivating cultural competence, but was utilized only by Karl’s institution and in two of the studies reviewed in Chapter Two (Cunningham, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017). Isaac’s course combined residential and online students on discussion boards, but not more complex group activities, such as designing a worship service. Consequently, administrators and instructors may want to provide the resources for at least occasional dialogues between online and offline students to foster knowledge of the global Christian community. Moreover, administrators and instructors may want to consider developing networks of Internet cafes to aid students serving in authoritarian regimes, where firewalls sometimes have blocked access to North American educational sites (Karst, 2017), or at least have developed the potential to block access by relying on national intranets (Wakefield, 2019).
For example, seminary administrators and instructors may want to cultivate relationships between communities of faith to allow for Internet access near the borders of countries whose governments have blocked North American websites at locations such as churches and faith-based charities. Thus, administrators and instructors may want to enrich their residential courses by allowing online students to join their campus-based conversations and, likewise, preserve this potential for diversity by developing Internet access locations near the borders of countries with authoritarian regimes for their distance students.

Finally, instructors may want to view themselves as hosts (Soh, 2016) for online discussions and reference the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a) to offset the sometimes-inappropriate conduct described by the instructors whom I interviewed, given cyberspace’s ability to shield students from immediate social repercussions for ill-considered remarks. The professors who participated in my research noted the impact from informal online spaces, such as social media sites, where students seemed to have acquired less-than-desirable habits. For example, Alistair, during a group interview, remarked on “the Facebook effect” in online instruction, in that “social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.” Alistair and others felt that the shield afforded by machine-mediated communication caused some students to be somewhat blunter than they necessarily would be in a residential class and required instructors to be proactive in creating psychologically safe spaces for learning through one-on-one communications with students, guidelines on confidentiality, requiring students to attend classes as cohorts, and allowing private spaces for reflection. Such practices, combined with the sincere interest repeatedly expressed by the instructors whom I interviewed in their students’ ministry contexts, reflected Soh’s (2016) four aspects of hospitality
– “(1) inclusion, (2) presence, (3) care, and (4) reciprocity” (pp. 204–205) – implying that professors should view themselves as hosts for inclusive, online conversations about theology and ministry in web-based classrooms that allow students to feel comfortable and welcome. In addition to viewing themselves as hosts for online discussions, instructors also may want to reference the proposed new ATS standards that underscore the importance of seminaries as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii). Students are often unaware of the accreditation standards undergirding their education (D’Andrea & Liu, 2009), and by highlighting accreditation standards’ role in the educational process, instructors may be able to help students not only realize the communities “of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) repeatedly referenced in the proposed new standards, but also appreciate the importance of accreditation on their learning and formation. Consequently, to offset machine-mediated communication’s deleterious impact, instructors may want to view themselves as hosts (Soh, 2016) for web-based conversations and to portray seminary classrooms as “communities of faith and learning,” as underscored in the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a, p. ii).

In summary, my study’s results imply that instructors and educational theorists may want to view theological reflection, as well as reflection that integrates theory with practice, from the perspective of Mezirow’s transformative learning theory (1990, 1991), especially his characterization of premise reflection and the potential for this type of reflection to help students cultivate a ministerial or professional identity. Additionally, administrators may want to provide resources for connecting online and offline students, and professors may want to integrate, whenever possible, online and residential students to help students develop the cultural competence highlighted in the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a). Finally, professors may want to view themselves as hosts for online discussions about theology and ministry, and to
reference the proposed new ATS standards that describe seminaries as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) in every standard.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

This research was crafted as a descriptive phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994), given my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions as delineated in Chapter One. Furthermore, this research was designed to include only instructors employed by Christian institutions accredited by the ATS who taught online courses in theological reflection. Specifically, the 13 participants in this research were employed at institutions that identified themselves as Christian in publicly available documents, such as academic catalogs, or that are affiliated with a Christian denomination (Atwood, 2010) and, therefore, shared a religious heritage that plays a role in theological reflection (Blodgett & Floding, 2015; Porter, 2013; Thompson et al., 2008). Moreover, I selected participants who were employed at institutions accredited by the ATS, as such schools uphold common academic standards (ATS, 2015b, 2015c, 2015d), and these shared standards facilitated the distillation of a shared instructional experience. Finally, participants, as part of a purposive sample, taught theological reflection through distance education, in which “the majority of instructor-directed learning” (ATS, 2015d, p.12) occurred in situations “without students and instructors being in the same location” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) through “synchronous or asynchronous … online[-] … assisted instruction” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10) that included “regular and substantive interaction of faculty with students” (ATS, 2015d, p. 10). Nonetheless, these participants’ views may be beneficial to policy makers, administrators, and instructors because ATS schools only recently have embraced online distance education (ATS, 2013; ATS, 2019b), partially due to concerns about personal and professional
formation in a learning context void of direct face-to-face interaction and shared community experiences (Hockridge, 2013).

Limitations are shortcomings in a study beyond the control of the research and include restrictions concerning methodology, participants, and the researcher as a human instrument (Pyrczak, 2016). In this research, limitations included analysis of the data with the modified van Kaam (1959, 1966) method developed by Moustakas (1994); the use of interviews and letters to future theological educators to represent participants’ experience in their own words, rather than observations of instructor-student interactions within learning management systems; the small number of participants, as recommended for phenomenological studies (Creswell, 2013); and my lifeworld, which may have influenced how I analyzed the findings. To address these limitations, I acknowledged that the findings represent only the 13 participants’ views and should be compared with those of other instructors, as well as complemented by the perspectives of additional community members, such as administrators and students. To further restrict my worldview’s influence, I bracketed my worldview during data collection and analysis through journaling (Appendix K) to document my personal views’ potential influence on the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Given my study’s findings, delimitations, and limitations, future researchers may want to conduct research on schools that blend residential and online students in online courses in theological reflection, instructors who employ the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a) as an aspect of their netiquette policies, professors who use assignments other than text or videoconferences to foster theological reflection, seminaries accredited by organizations similar to the ATS, and professors from more diverse backgrounds. Only two studies surveyed in the
literature review in Chapter Two (Cunningham, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2017) and only one instructor involved in my research fully integrated online and residential students in reflective group discussions. Consequently, future researchers may want to conduct a case study or narrative study at a seminary that blends residential and online students in reflective discussions to present the distinctive features of such classrooms and to probe such blended classes’ potential to enrich on- and off-campus students’ sociocultural awareness. A case study would allow for the perspectives of instructors, administrators, students, and affiliated church members or denominational leaders to be presented, while a narrative study would facilitate sharing the findings with ATS deans and instructors, as well as foundations that may be able to offset the costs of developing such blended classrooms. Additionally, future researchers should consider conducting a case study at a seminary that employs the proposed new ATS standards as part of an overall netiquette policy to discern whether seminaries’ refrain that they are “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) helps students differentiate the online classroom from the online chatroom and, thus, eliminates some of the detrimental effects from pervasive informal Internet communications that the professors in my research cited. Because the instructors whom I interviewed primarily used discussion boards or videoconferences as platforms for theological reflection, future researchers may want to conduct a phenomenological study with a group of instructors who use assignments other than text or video discussions to facilitate theological reflection in online courses, such as role plays conducted in cyberspace (Fitch et al., 2016), photography (Klappa et al., 2017), films (McCann & Huntley-Moore, 2016), or music (Keville et al., 2018, 2019).

Moreover, future researchers may want to investigate courses in online theological reflection with more diverse groups of instructors. For example, scholars could conduct a
phenomenological study similar to mine, which was delimited to instructors employed at ATS-accredited institutions, but instead with instructors employed at institutions accredited by organizations similar to the ATS, but that serve seminaries located throughout the world, such as the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS), the European Evangelical Accrediting Association (EEAA), the International Council for Evangelical Theological Education (ICETE), or member associations of the World Conference of Associations of Theological Institutions (WOCATI), such as the Association for Theological Education in South East Asia (ATESEA). Alternatively, future researchers could conduct a phenomenological study like mine with a more diverse group of participants, given that my research was limited to the views of Caucasian Catholics and mainline or evangelical Protestants, all of whom were male except one female participant. Finally, future researchers could conduct an ethnographic study concerning online courses in theological reflection at a Historically Black seminary or one of the schools in which instruction is delivered in a language other than English, such as an ATS seminary offering a program for Latino/a students, an Asian school accredited by the ATS, or one of the global partnerships described in the *Educational Models and Practices Peer Group Final Reports* (Graham, 2018). An ethnographic study could probe culture and language’s unique influences on courses in theological reflection offered online. Consequently, some of the principal avenues for future research involve studies about online courses that blend residential and online students or utilize netiquette policies that incorporate proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a), as well as investigations with more diverse groups of instructors.

**Summary**

The individual and group interviews, combined with the letters of advice to future theological educators, portrayed online courses in theological reflection as conversations that
were hosted in the challenging venue of cyberspace and interweaved theology and experiences from the delightfully diverse contexts of students’ ministry settings. The conversations about theology and experience were designed to help students create beautiful actions that truly corresponded with their core theological beliefs, but nonetheless were appropriate for their ministry situations (Borko et al., 1997; Fahey, 2002; Taylor, 2013). The ministry settings represented in the online space transcended geographical locations and afforded opportunities to hear voices from the global Christian community, providing instructors with a method of helping students cultivate cultural competence, as outlined in the proposed new ATS standards (ATS, 2019a, Standard 3.4). As Doug noted during a group interview, students serving in locations separated by thousands of miles could meet during a single videoconference: “My [video] call yesterday was with a student in Israel; in the same group was a student in Israel, Colombia, Korea, Utah, Washington, and then one that's now in Slovenia.” As online education progresses, perhaps the diversity found within cyber-classrooms can be shared with residential classrooms, as in Cunningham’s (2014) research.

Although online classrooms allowed students worldwide to interact with one another, the online space sometimes emboldened students to be less courteous or careful in their remarks than they might be in a residential classroom, given that a laptop or smartphone shielded them from the immediate repercussions from inappropriate social behaviors. Matthew compared inconsiderate remarks or behaviors in digital classrooms to hasty judgments made about fellow drivers, given that metal and glass automobiles’ exterior sometimes causes drivers to forget about the humans inside other automobiles, who have their own complex life situations, and Alistair, during a group interview, felt that the somewhat-brash communications that he witnessed in his online classroom were due to the informal online spaces, such as social media,
from which his students may have acquired less-than-desirable habits because “social networking allows you to hide behind the anonymity of your computer screen, and you don’t have to look anyone in the eye, and you perhaps say things you might not say face-to-face.”

Given that students can complete degrees wholly online that require no in-person interactions with peers, that many digital communications in everyday settings occur with humans located hundreds or thousands of miles away (e.g., chat sessions with customer service representatives who may never be encountered in a brick-and-mortar store and with whom users may only interact once), and that text-mediated communications remain as digital artifacts that can be reread and shared with others, rather than as “bits and pieces in people’s memories,” as Matthew noted during his individual interview, professors exercised a great deal of care in demonstrating hospitality to their students and in teaching them to be hospitable to one another (Soh, 2016).

The proposed new ATS standards that repeatedly reference seminaries as “communities of faith and learning” (ATS, 2019a, p. ii) may be useful to instructors and administrators crafting netiquette policies that orient students to the online educational space, which differs from the informal online settings that students encounter in their daily lives. To summarize my research in one sentence, online instruction in theological reflection involves conversations about theology and experience that equip religious leaders from diverse contexts to express their theological beliefs beautifully and faithfully through words and actions carefully orchestrated by hosts who seek to preserve the ethos of free expressions of ideas and beliefs for the purpose of formation and transformation. The faithful integration of beliefs and actions in pastoral or professional practice, as well as the skills of online instructors who allow for the expression of polyphonic voices in the online classroom, resembles the skills demonstrated by organists playing historic organs that require nods to assistants, who then pull manual stops on the organs, while
simultaneously being cognizant of the notes to be played and the appropriate positioning of the feet and hands, but nonetheless being surrounded by the thunderous tones of the organs that they are playing (Ravensbergen, 2015; van Hoef, 2013).
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APPENDIX A: TIMELINE AND BUDGET

Dissertation Phase Budget ($28,000):

Tuition ($22,000), Transcription ($2,000), Travel ($4,000)

Every Semester:

Register for and complete EDUC 989/990 (Note: I can enroll in EDUC 989 only nine times).

January-May 2020 (EDUC 989 No. 7 Spring 2020) – Request a formal review of Chapters Four and Five of the dissertation’s manuscript by the chair and committee for recommended edits. While awaiting committee feedback, prepare and rehearse PowerPoint presentation for defense; begin changing to APA seventh-edition style, available as an e-book through Vital Source; and begin completing other desired edits.

May-August 2020 (EDUC 989 No. 8 or EDUC 990 Summer 2020) – Work with committee members, a research consultant, and a professional editor to create a final draft of the dissertation manuscript for defense; complete edits on the final manuscript as requested by the committee; request that the research consultant review the final dissertation manuscript for the defense; prepare a draft of the article or plan to submit the dissertation results to a journal for publication as specified in the defense rubric.

August or September 2020 – Discuss reapplying for admission and completing a School of Education Policy Appeals Form with the chair, if necessary, as the seven-year time limit ends January 2021. Check the current dissertation handbook for policies and the contact email of the administrative chair of graduate research and ask for permission to complete the dissertation
defense, then start completing all expired courses (some courses expire in January 2021 if completed in 2014 or earlier). Alternatively, discuss earning an education specialist degree and taking necessary classes for this degree if an EdD no longer is feasible. Keep in mind that the acceptance deadline is roughly one month before the semester begins (mid-December for Spring 2021). Determine when I would need to submit graduation paperwork (perhaps the beginning of the next semester to graduate on time by the end of next semester).

**August-December 2020** (EDUC 989 No. 9 or EDUC 990 No. 1 Fall 2020) – Ask Dr. Lamport about finishing coursework (EDUC 990) during the Winter 2020 four-week semester (December 14, 2020-January 8, 2021; remember that you can enroll in EDUC 989 only nine times) if I need extra time (the Spring 16-week option may be preferable if I can obtain an extension by appealing to SOE). Graduating in Winter 2020 would require that I submit graduation paperwork by the beginning of the Winter semester, December 14, 2020. Develop a PowerPoint dissertation defense and rehearse it on WebEx, then have the final manuscript reviewed by a professional editor (APA edit through Scribendi, Scribbr, or Liberty editors) before or after the defense. Finally, schedule dissertation defense dates; arrange a preparatory defense with the chair; complete the dissertation defense; complete final edits recommended by the chair, committee, and research consultant; complete graduation paperwork; and submit the dissertation manuscript both electronically and in hard copy to Liberty University’s library.

**January-May 2021** (if the SOE approves an extension, EDUC 990 No. 1 Spring 2021) – Ask the chair and advising about completing and submitting requisite graduation paperwork,
as I need to finish by the beginning of next semester to submit graduation paperwork on time and complete the items specified above in the previous semester needed to complete my degree.
APPENDIX B: SITE PERMISSION REQUEST

This form was developed from a template provided by the Institutional Review Board (Liberty University, 2017a).

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]  
[Title]  
[Company]  
[Address 1]  
[Address 2]  
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education (Curriculum & Instruction) degree. The title of my research project is “A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools,” and the purpose of my research is to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

I am writing to request your permission to contact instructors, who are employed by your institution and who teach theological reflection in the online environment, to invite them to participate in my research study. Courses that often include theological reflection are field practicums or apprenticeships, clinical pastoral education experiences or mentored ministry placements, foundations courses in which students develop their personal theologies or vision statements for leadership, worship, or mission as well as courses on spiritual or ethical formation requiring students to develop the ability to exegete the text of their lives.

Participants will be asked to: participate in an individual interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about their experiences teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; complete a brief letter to future theological educators about teaching theological reflection that should take approximately 30 minutes to complete; participate in a focus group interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about shared experiences of teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; and review transcripts of their interview responses that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please sign, copy, and paste the below template into an email message and respond by email to
The template required by Liberty University for this approval letter appears below my signature.

If you email such a letter, I will then ask for the names of instructors at your institution who by reputation, course evaluations, or a similar measure seem to instruct students effectively in theological reflection and can therefore provide a rich data sample. I also plan to contact your seminary’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for permission to interview relevant faculty. Please note that I have conditional approval from Liberty University IRB as full approval requires permission from each participating site’s dean and IRB.

Instructors who are allowed by their administrators and choose to participate in the research will receive for their institutional libraries a copy of *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Jowers, 2011) edited by my husband, Dr. Dennis W. Jowers, who is a professor of theology and apologetics at a small Christian college and seminary near [Insert Location], as well as a $30 gift card to an online bookstore.

Regardless of your decision, if you know of any other deans who may be interested in allowing me to contact their faculty, I would greatly appreciate receiving their names by email.

Should you have any questions or concerns about my research, please send me an email so that I can assist in allowing you to make an informed decision. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Judy Jowers [Insert Name]
Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University

[Insert Site Permission Letter Template]
APPENDIX C: SITE PERMISSION LETTER TEMPLATE

This form was developed from a template provided by the Institutional Review Board (Liberty University, 2018a).

Please sign, copy, and paste this template into an email message and return to jajowers@liberty.edu. Thank you.

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear Judy Jowers,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools,” I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at [NAME OF SCHOOL/FACILITY].

Check the following box, as applicable:

☐ I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Your Company/Organization]
APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

This form was developed from a template provided by the Institutional Review Board (Liberty University, 2017b).

[Insert Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education (Curriculum & Instruction) degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, teach theological reflection in the online environment at a Christian institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, and are willing to participate in my research, you will be asked to: participate in an individual interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about your experiences teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; complete a brief letter to future theological educators about teaching theological reflection that should take approximately 30 minutes to complete; participate in a focus group interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about shared experiences of teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; and review transcripts of your interview responses that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It should take approximately 135 minutes for you to complete the procedures listed. Your institutional affiliation and your name will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in the research, please complete, sign, and return the consent document to the researcher [redacted].

A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $30 Amazon gift card as well as a digital copy of the approved dissertation manuscript, and your institutional library will receive a copy of Four Views on Divine Providence (Jowers, 2011) edited by my husband, Dr. Dennis W. Jowers, who is a professor of theology and apologetics at a small Christian college and seminary near [redacted].
These tokens of my appreciation will be provided to you after the research has been completed.

Sincerely,

Judy Jowers (追问)
Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University

[Insert Appendix F: Participant Consent Form]
APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT FOLLOW UP RECRUITMENT LETTER

This form was developed from a template provided by the Institutional Review Board (Liberty University, 2016b).

[Insert Date]
[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education (Curriculum & Instruction) degree. Approximately two weeks ago, an email was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is [Date].

If you are 18 years of age or older, teach theological reflection in the online environment at a Christian institution accredited by the Association of Theological Schools, and are willing to participate in my research, you will be asked to: participate in an individual interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about your experiences teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; complete a brief letter to future theological educators about teaching theological reflection that should take approximately 30 minutes to complete; participate in a focus group interview hosted on a videoconferencing platform about shared experiences of teaching theological reflection that should last approximately 45 minutes; and review transcripts of your interview responses that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete. It should take approximately 135 minutes for you to complete the procedures listed. Your institutional affiliation and your name will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in the research, please complete, sign, and return the consent document to the researcher (contact information). A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $30 Amazon gift card as well as a digital copy of the approved dissertation manuscript, and your institutional library will receive a copy of Four Views on Divine Providence (Jowers, 2011) edited by my husband, Dr. Dennis W. Jowers, who is a professor of theology and apologetics at a small Christian college and seminary near [location].
These tokens of my appreciation will be provided to you after the research has been completed.

Sincerely,
Judy Jowers (_______)
Doctoral Candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University

[Insert Appendix F: Participant Consent Form]
APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

This form was developed from a template provided by the Institutional Review Board (Liberty University, 2018b).

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 2/14/2019 to 2/13/2020
Protocol # 3478.021419

CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools

Judy A. Jowers
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study involving one group of 10-12 instructors on the experience of teaching theological reflection in the online learning environment. You were selected as a possible participant because you are employed as an online instructor of theological reflection at a Christian seminary accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Judy Jowers, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an individual interview through a videoconferencing platform about your experiences teaching theological reflection. This interview would last approximately 45 minutes and would be recorded as an audio-video file.
2. Complete a brief letter to future theological educators about teaching theological reflection. This letter would take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and you would be required to email your response to the researcher.
3. Participate in a focus group interview through a videoconferencing platform about shared experiences of teaching theological reflection. This interview would last approximately 45 minutes and would be recorded as an audio-video file.
4. Review transcripts of your interview responses that should take approximately 15 minutes to complete.

Risks: The risks for participants involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include being able to better educate religious leaders to engage in theological reflection on their ministry practice.

Compensation: Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. After the research has been completed, a theological book, *Four Views on Divine Providence* (Jowers, 2011), will be postal mailed to participants' institutional library and a $30 Amazon gift card will be provided to participants. All participants are to receive the gift card and their libraries are to
receive the theological book even if they have withdrawn from the study. Moreover, all participants, including those who have withdrawn from the study, are to receive an electronic copy of the dissertation manuscript after it has been approved.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information 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.

Procedures used to maintain participant confidentiality appear in the below list:

- To protect the privacy of the participants, participants will be assigned pseudonyms and interviews will be conducted where others cannot easily overhear the conversations. The codebook linking pseudonyms and actual names is to be stored apart from the data in a locked filing cabinet to decrease the likelihood of linking participants and their employing institutions with comments made in interviews or in letters to future theological educators.
- Furthermore, electronic data will be stored in password protected files, hard copy data will be stored in locked filing cabinets, and all data will be destroyed three years after the study has been concluded. Electronic data will be permanently deleted, and hard copy data will be shredded. The results of the study, however, may be published as a research article or presentation, and the results will appear in the published dissertation manuscript on the digital commons of Liberty University.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed so that they can be analyzed with the writing samples. Recordings, transcriptions, and writing samples will be maintained in password protected files and only the researcher will have access to these files. These recordings and the writing samples will be erased three years after the study.
- Because participants will be involved in a focus group, the other participants in the focus group may be able to recognize other participants by their voices, physical appearances, or user names. As a further limit to confidentiality, I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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 Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Judy Jowers. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at
You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Mark A. Lamport at [redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Participant  Date

_________________________  _______________________
Signature of Investigator  Date
APPENDIX G: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL LETTER

February 14, 2019

Judy Arline Jowers
IRB Approval 3478.021419: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools

Dear Judy Arline Jowers,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. 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.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

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

Sincerely,

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS/GUIDE

Individual Interview Protocol: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools

Time of interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:
Description of project: The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Your responses are confidential, and your name and institution are required to be replaced with pseudonyms.

1. Please describe your journey in becoming an instructor and the discipline areas in which you currently teach or have taught.

   - Educational, professional (e.g., ministry, military) background
   - Subject areas (e.g., theology, field placements, spiritual formation)
2. Please describe your experience teaching theological reflection in the online environment.

- **Representative or typical course** (walk me through one of your courses from initial to final week)

- **Example of the best, worst, or most unusual class** which you have taught, experienced as a student, or heard described; **compare** to residential courses

- **Memories of students** (unusual perspectives on topics mentioned in reflective assignments or surprising ministry settings)

- **Recollections of colleagues**, administrators, governmental regulators or accreditors (e.g., instructors who had special assignments for online courses or field site supervisors who had exceptional gifts or abilities)

- **Stories you tell about technology** (Learning Management Systems; communication platforms such as text, audio telephone, videoconference)

3. How have you explained the **purpose** of theological reflection to students?

- **Relationship of this purpose to experience, faith, culture, prayer, denominational tradition or ecclesial family** (Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Mainline Protestant, or Evangelical Protestant), students’ **ministry** beyond graduation

- **Course outcomes and objectives** that you have linked with theological reflection (e.g., writing ability, theological content knowledge, spiritual development, ability to relate academic learning to ministry settings)
4. How have you used instructional resources or techniques to teach students about theological reflection?

- **Experiences** for reflection (prior life experiences, ministry or professional field experiences, calling or vocational narratives, case studies, reflection groups or conversations with on-site mentors; **best and worst** experiences

- **Course materials** such as textbooks, group discussions, examples of theological reflection including sacred or secular writings (e.g., short stories or poetry), images or artworks (e.g., paintings, music, photography, sculpture, or films), anecdotes, metaphors for reflection, guided questions or templates that students complete as assignments; **least and most favorite aspects** of these resources; what made these aspects least and most favorite?

5. What has influenced your experience of teaching theological reflection online?

- Your initial and **continuing education** (e.g., your undergraduate or graduate instructors as well as books or speakers or ideas encountered after formal education completed)

- Your **professional experience** as minister, instructor, etc. (e.g., patterns in ministry contexts or content of student assignments) or Institutional mandates from administrators or accreditors (e.g., ATS, provincial Quality Assurance framework regulators), governmental entities (e.g., Federal Student Aid or Title IV programs), learning management system interfaces and guidelines (e.g., Quality Matters)

6. What **benefits**, if any, have you as an instructor experienced while teaching theological reflection in the online environment?
7. What benefits, if any, have your students seemed to experience after receiving instruction in theological reflection in the online environment?

- **Greater access** because online for international, rural, differently abled, or employed students as well as those with familial or other personal responsibilities
- **Understanding** of the subject area (e.g., theology) or ministry practice (e.g., assumptions underlying problematic church or counseling settings)
- **Formation** of character (e.g., self-confidence, emotional intelligence) as well as pastoral imagination (e.g., understanding the relevance of Scriptural truths to events in their personal and professional experiences)

8. What challenges, if any, have you encountered while teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

- **Individual differences** such as age, experience, or preferred learning styles impacting the ability of students to engage in reflection (e.g., preference for speaking rather than writing reflective insights) or **cultural differences** for those from collectivist societies that place less emphasis on individual opinions or cultures that place a greater distance between instructor and student
- Exceptionally **frustrating events** (e.g., technology-related issues and artificiality perhaps due to fear of judgement by peers or instructor); **circumstances**
surrounding these events (as a prompt to elaborate)

9. How have you **overcome** these **challenges**?

- Providing and enforcing **ground rules** for any student-instructor and peer-to-peer interactions (e.g., explaining that diverse or dissenting views are welcome to facilitate alternative vantage points on issues)
- Providing **alternative assessment strategies** such as **media-rich** coursework or **ungraded** assignments or opportunities for private reflections from which selections can be submitted for grading

10. How would you **advise others** who were considering teaching theological reflection online?

- **Relevant resources** such as books, review of other instructors’ course materials, conversations with colleagues
- **Common mistakes** or pitfalls to avoid (e.g., neglecting to interact with students)

11. **What else** should others know about teaching theological reflection online?

- Please elaborate as I don’t fully understand or how would you **elaborate** on [summary of issue participant just mentioned]?
- Could you provide a **real or hypothetical example**?
- What makes you think that? (e.g., that students are less or more prepared than in former times?)

**Rationale for Individual Interview Questions**

Please consult the above section (Data Collection) for a complete discussion of the relationship between the interview questions, research questions, and empirical literature.
APPENDIX I: LETTER TO FUTURE THEOLOGICAL EDUCATORS

Letter to Future Theological Educators

Based on your experience as an online instructor of theological reflection, how would you advise those learning to teach theological reflection? What stories would you share with them to convey the lessons you have learned? Where would you recommend that they look for guidance on learning and teaching about theological reflection?

When answering these questions, you may want to consider metaphors or images for the process of learning and teaching about theological reflection, exceptionally helpful and unhelpful instructional methods for creating or choosing situations for reflection, types of students who seemed especially receptive or unresponsive to the online environment, high and low quality examples of reflection that you have experienced as well as support structures that you and your students found beneficial or destructive.

When you have completed your letter, please email the letter to the researcher (jajowers@liberty.edu). Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Rationale for Instructions for the Letter to Future Theological Educators

These letter instructions addressed the Central Question (CQ) as well as Sub-Question One (SQ1) concerning the participants’ experience of teaching theological reflection, in the online environment an experience not yet voiced within the literature (Beaty, 2014; Ferguson, 2016) as illustrated in the preponderance of literature reviews on the helping professions of healthcare (Goulet et al., 2015) and education (Beauchamp, 2015) contrasted with the handful of studies on teaching theological reflection (Doehring, 2013; Hatcher, 2013; Mallaby & Tan, 2018; McGarrah-Sharp & Morris, 2014; Wong, 2009, 2011, 2016a). By asking the instructors to approach the topic from a hypothetical advisory role, I probed their experience from an
additional viewpoint as recommended by Patton (2014) and likewise by eliciting metaphors for teaching reflection, I sought to help the instructors articulate their views on a somewhat abstract principle (Alvesson, 2011; Schwind, 2015). Furthermore, the sections of the letter instructions relating to lessons learned while teaching reflection and sources of guidance for information on teaching reflection concerned Sub-Question One (SQ1) regarding the influences on the participants’ experiences as recommended by both Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2013) in phenomenological research.

The portions of the letter instructions asking about helpful or unhelpful instructional methods, receptive or unreceptive students, high or low quality examples of reflection, and beneficial or destructive support structures related to Sub-Question Two (SQ2) probing the benefits of reflection as well as Sub-Question Three (SQ3) investigating the challenges of teaching theological reflection. Potential benefits of teaching reflection in the online environment reported in the literature have included reaching a wider audience (Brown, 2016) as well as enabling students to express their views on professional experiences (Rose, 2016). Benefits associated with reflection, regardless of the medium of instruction, have included critical thinking (Naber & Wyatt, 2014), emotional intelligence (Pack, 2014), self-efficacy (Stahl et al, 2016; Tan, 2013), professional identity development (Hatcher, 2013; Wong, 2016a), the integration of theory with practice (Foley, 2014, 2017), as well as the ability to pursue lifelong learning (Nash, 2014). These benefits however have been counterbalanced by the challenges of teaching reflection reported in the literature such as fear of judgement by peers (Testa & Egan, 2015) or instructors (Binks et al., 2013; Marsh, 2014), student characteristics such as age or personal preferences that affect reflection (Cook, et al., 2017; Ruiz-López et al., 2015; Zulfikar & Mujiburrahman, 2017; Wong, 2009), cultural differences (Kuswandono, 2014) in the value
placed on reflection, the stymied nature of online discourse (Rivers et al., 2014), and a general haziness of the purpose of reflection as illustrated by the numerous definitions for reflection (Beauchamp, 2015; Collin et al., 2013; Rose, 2016). The comments provided by my participants may thereby assist practitioners in teaching reflection and likewise assist researchers in developing the research base for online theological education by elucidating the foremost benefits and challenges associated with teaching theological reflection in the online environment.
APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Focus Group Interview Protocol: A Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experience of Online Instructors of Theological Reflection at Christian Institutions Accredited by the Association of Theological Schools

Time of interview:

Date:

Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewees:

Position of Interviewees:

Introduction to focus group interview: I would like to welcome each of you to this discussion about teaching theological reflection in the online environment. I would also like to thank each of you for sacrificing your valuable time. As explained earlier, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment for instructors at Christian institutions accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. Your responses are confidential, and I plan to replace your name and institution with pseudonyms. Please share your comments even if they differ from those of other participants. The purpose of this discussion is to allow you to voice your thoughts and to interact with other professors. During the discussion, each participant should be given an opportunity to respond to the questions. If you would like to comment on someone’s response, please wait until that person has finished speaking.
1. Please introduce yourself to the focus group by providing your name, a summary of your teaching experience, and your favorite resource (e.g., book or website) on theological reflection.

2. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase, “theological reflection?”

3. Please describe ways in which you have instructed students about theological reflection in the online environment.

4. What is your most vivid memory of teaching theological reflection in the online learning environment?

5. What or whom has impacted your instruction of theological reflection?

6. In what ways, if any, have you found the experience of teaching theological reflection in the online environment rewarding?

7. In what ways, if any, has learning about theological reflection seemed to positively influence your students?

8. In what ways, if any, have you found teaching theological reflection in the online environment challenging?

9. What resources, if any, have you experienced as useful in overcoming these challenges?

10. How would you advise those who were seeking to develop online courses in theological reflection?

11. What else should others know about teaching theological reflection in the online environment?

**Rationale for Focus Group Questions**

Please consult the above section (Data Collection) for a complete discussion of the relationship between the interview questions, research questions, and empirical literature.
APPENDIX K: SELECTIONS FROM RESEARCH JOURNAL

08/31/17
While augmenting the data analysis sections, I realized that I would need to review the relevant sections within my dissertation, Situation to Self and Researcher’s Role, as part of the epoché process to set aside my positive views on reflection and tendency as an evangelical to provide a more prominent role for Scripture within theological reflection. Eller (2016) mentioned the Situation to Self and Researcher’s Role sections of his dissertation as an early form of epoché in his discussion of data analysis methods.

01/06/18
Linking secular subjects such as mythology (Brumble, 1998) and science (Poythress, 2006) to topics within my everyday life seems to resemble reflection that integrates theory with practice.

03/01/18
Norrie et al. (2012) noted the importance of researching the teaching of reflective practice in different fields and comparing these results. Their admonition meshes well with Dunne’s (1993) exhortation to present vignettes on teaching practice to better understand phronesis and, thus, develop a body of literature representing the profession, while not reducing it to always-applicable maxims.

03/20/18
A study on the relationship between science education and theological reflection in ATS schools may be a possible avenue for further research, given the recent study on science education in the ATS (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 2016, 2017; Atwaters et al., 2017). Dr. Patrick S. Franklin (2017) used theological reflection in his exemplar syllabus for integrating the sciences and theological education.

05/12/18
My favorite texts thus far are those by Gabriel Marcel, Max van Manen, and Joseph Dunne, as they describe the type of person and educator that I aspire to be and what first motivated me to study reflection, which I view as the one trait distinguishing me as an educator. I made this entry as the question, “What have been your favorite books while pursuing this degree?” seemed like a good one. I also greatly enjoyed Alfred Schutz’s (1970) work, “Phenomenology and Social Relations,” edited by Helmut R. Wagner, who collected relevant writings by Schutz and organized them thematically. I found this work helpful, as it explained the relevance of Husserl (and Weber) to the social sciences. All communication relies on communicators’ understanding of “typifications,” which rely on something that transcends our experience and seem to resemble Plato’s forms or Chomsky’s linguistic constructs that pervade all language systems (e.g., mother and father).

05/18/18
The roots of van Manen’s (1997a, 1997b) theory of reflective practice are in a phenomenological pedagogy that asks students to refrain from placing experience on a Procrustean bed of theory (Langeveld, 1967, 1983). An idea for further research may be comparing Anton Boisen (1946,
1960), who wanted psychologists to listen to their patients, with van Manen, who wanted us to listen to children (students) and the experiences created with them in the pedagogical encounter.

06/09/18
Vagle (2014) recommended that phenomenological researchers bracket (bridle) the results that they expect to find from the data, e.g., my concerns about the lack of authenticity possible in online interactions, as epitomized by the cartoon, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog,” drawn by Peter Steiner in 1993 for The New Yorker.

06/09/18
Vagle (2014, Figures 2.1, 2.2) explained that Husserl wanted to describe the essence or the “of-ness” for an experience (e.g., the experience of teaching) that seeks to communicate a meaning and is related to participants’ lifeworld (worldview, perspective, or mindset). The focus on communication of an experience appeals to me, as essences seem to be a clarification of linguistic meanings that facilitate understandings sometimes clouded by offhand and domesticated uses of words such as “frustrating” or “rewarding.” Moreover, if helpful worldviews can be unearthed through my research, other online educators may be able to consider adopting such attitudes, at least temporarily, to refresh their instructional experiences, which sometimes seem to be reduced to maintaining the appropriate learning analytics for internal and external administrators accessing their online courses. Vagle (2014), in his “Resource Dig” for the philosophy of phenomenology, referenced The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology as Husserl’s (1970) primary work on phenomenology, which emphasized how we conceptualize and think about how the world constrains the knowledge that we can gather from experiences. Conversely, Heidegger (1927) focused more on the through-ness or in-ness of existence in Being and Time, which viewed the human as embedded in experience and unable to bracket worldviews from lived experience, while embodied living, as opposed to perceived experience, seemed to be the focus for Heidegger. Vagle (2014) blended Husserl and Heidegger to create post-intentional phenomenology, which centers around the cord of experience between object and subject or the in-between-ness of experience.

07/07/18
I am interested in how instructors encourage students to reflect because I do not remember being taught to do so during my Master of Arts program, which was completed admittedly while working full-time as an elementary teacher in Chicago’s underserved Englewood neighborhood. I remember seeing a reflective question at the end of lesson plans for Chicago Public Schools: “What would you do next time?” or a similar question, as well as routinely creating project posters for my 4-H projects in veterinary science and writing detailed lab reports for my science classes in high school and freshman college classes.

09/27/19
Repeatedly listening to interviews has helped keep them fresh in my memory as I analyze the data.