

STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE PROFESSOR COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE
INSTRUCTION: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

William Eugene Carpenter

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe 13 students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The focus was to answer the central research question of how online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment. The theories guiding this study were Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory, as they correlated the need for professor communication with adult learning and social presence since communication can impact academic success for adult learners. To collect data, interviews and focus groups were conducted, and written journals were collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Moustakas, 1994). These three methods were incorporated to gather rich information from multiple sources. For analysis, Moustakas's (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology for data analysis were used. The four processes used were epoche, transcendental phenomenological reduction with the use of horizontalization (listing each expression related to the experience), imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings. This data analysis involved examining significant themes and statements that reflected commonalities among all lived participant experiences in a simplified way (Moustakas, 1994). Results of this study impacted online learning by providing college professors with comments on online communication trends that positively and negatively impacted student course experiences.

Keywords: community college, online learning, communication, social presence

Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to the strongest person I know - my hero and my daughter, Jessica. On September 19, 2016, at two years old, she was diagnosed with Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia and put on an over two-year treatment regimen. Watching her battle through treatments, blood transfusions, lumbar punctures, blood panel checks, emergency room evaluations, and other procedures in a little over two years provided me the first-hand ability to witness God's work to help one of His children conquer something many could not fathom defeating. Knowing what she was battling while always maintaining a smile and positive attitude, it reminded me that no matter what hardship I faced in my daily walk when I wanted to complain, there were always others who dealt with more than I can imagine. When there were times I questioned if I should stop my educational path due to other obligations, I was reminded that Jessica never quit, and she battled through what was far more superior than earning a degree. She gave me strength, encouragement, and motivation to persevere when I did not know if that was an option.

Jessica rang the victory bell in December of 2018, reaffirming that God has an ultimate plan for everyone. While some may question why she went through the torture she had to endure, I know it is because she was being primed to help others in her future by sharing her journey with them. I stand proud today knowing that I have a daughter who has already shown me how to persevere without even knowing how much she changed her daddy's outlook, motivation, and daily walk. I started this doctorate program with the goal of furthering my professional career to one day provide her with a strong college education. I end this program with much more than that. Earning a doctorate is one of the most challenging paths a scholar can endure, but it is not impossible. It takes drive and

motivation, which I received from a beautiful, positive, and heart-melting young warrior that beat cancer when faced with adversity. Jessica, I dedicate this work in your name because without you, I cannot confirm it would ever be completed. I love you more than you will ever know, and you are forever my hero!

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I would first like to thank and praise God because without Him, none of this dissertation would have been possible.

I would also like to convey the deepest and richest appreciation for my Committee Chair, Dr. Karla Swafford and my Methodologist, Dr. Meredith Park. I thank you both so much for giving me the opportunity to work with each of you individually and as a collective team. Your guidance, support, motivation, and prayers during this journey will never be forgotten.

I am very blessed to have such wonderfully supporting family and friends. To all of you, I express such gratitude for the encouragement, prayers, and words of wisdom. To my loving wife and daughter, thank you for your love and patience, as I know there were times it was not easy.

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List of Abbreviations

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Concurrent analysis (CA)

Doctor of Education (Ed.D.)

Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Online Community College of America (OCCA)

Out-of-Classroom Communication (OCC)

Sub-Question (SQ)

The Society to Encourage Studies at Home (SESH)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Each semester, college students can take college courses online, and many two- and four-year colleges offer online coursework. Today, community colleges offer advanced academic opportunities for these students by providing programs through online and on-campus learning environments (Jurgens, 2010; Lundberg, 2014; McClenney, 2013). Online programs do not always lead to academic success, even though this online environment offers advantages over on-campus courses (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Steens, 2012). This study was designed to examine the experiences of college professor communication in online courses – a topic that was insufficiently understood, therefore, producing a gap in the current research. This chapter provides a framework for this qualitative research study. The first component of this chapter is the background for the problem, which creates a foundation for this study and include basic historical, social, and theoretical components. Other components in this chapter will include theoretical foundations of communication efforts from students and professors, learning habits, time management, and perspectives of communication; situation to self; problem statement; and purpose statement. This first chapter also details the significance of the study, four research questions, definitions relevant to this study, and provides a summary. The purpose of this chapter was to provide a framework for this qualitative research study.

Background

The history and importance of communication in education have been noted for years (Vygotsky, 1980). This correlates to the current trend of higher education, which is online learning (Adnan, 2018; Allen & Seaman, 2010; Cahill, 2014). In a social focus, the uprising educational societal norm of online learning seeks communication to assist in student learning to

optimize success rates (Dickinson, 2017; Hassini, 2006; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015; Guler, 2017). The belief for this study is there are multiple contributions that assist in a student's online success, primarily professor communication. Secondary contributions are social presence and perspectives of communication.

Historical

Historically, it has been important for educators to communicate to enhance a student's learning (Vygotsky, 1980). In any realm of life, communication has helped people understand what others may want them to know, and in online instruction, this has also been especially important (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017). Students in online courses do not have in-person interaction with their professors as they would in a physical on-site classroom, so communication is a link to help ensure students understand the expectations of the online professor (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014). In the past, this interaction suggests online classroom communication was essential to a student's academic achievement (Brooks & Young, 2016). Tsai and Shen (2013) confirmed this in their study on improving students' experiences of online education by combining learning with professor interactions. To help students get a clear understanding of a professor's expectations on course materials and assignment instructions, online communication is extremely helpful (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Historically, professors should never assume students will initiate communication (Boling et al., 2014); therefore, communication efforts have been enriched with the use of professor's deep, rich messages that can make students feel they are an essential part of class, and when this communication takes place, students get a stronger understanding of criteria and expectations, which correlates to better academic achievement (Costly & Lange, 2016).

Social

Skramstad, Schlosser, and Orellana (2012) claimed:

No literature has been found directly discussing the communication patterns for assignment submission of online distance education students. Determining communication patterns of students in all online course work may allow instructors to adjust their own communication patterns to better meet student needs. (p. 187)

In the current societal age of education, there is no singular style of teaching students, as every student has different needs. For example, there are positive perspectives from students when it comes to professors using email to communication; although, timeliness of email replies is viewed as essentially important (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Belair, 2012; Hassini, 2006). In addition, using email as the only communication method negatively affects student performance (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997; Betts, 2009; Dickinson, 2017). Using different, frequent methods of communication, such as phone calls, text messages, and social media, are preferred (Cooper, 2008, Gunawardena, 1995; Harting & Erthal, 2005; Hassini, 2006; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015). To avoid accumulating fees from texting due to being out of the country, there are applications that provide a method of instant messaging for professors to utilize that students appreciate because not communicating with a professor due to monetary issues will negatively impact a student's performance (Amirault, 2012; Belair, 2012; Guler, 2017).

Theoretical

The theoretical frameworks on which this research study was based were Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. Some define andragogy as teaching adults how to learn, but some dispute age criteria of adults. Knowles (1980) defined adults as those who demonstrate adult roles, act like

an adult, and have an adult self-concept. Additionally, andragogy focuses on meeting the goals and needs of each student, institutions of higher learning, and society (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980; Loeng, 2017). This research study focused on the theory of andragogy because of the emphasis on practices and methods of teaching adult students. In addition, the social presence theory of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) recognized the degree to which a person is seen as a “real person,” which is vital in online coursework. Their theory focused on how social effects were caused by the amount of social presence received by others, which in this study were professors and students. Social presence was known as the communicator’s awareness of the communication partner’s presence.

Important concepts and variables of professor communication with online instruction were communication through email, texting, assignment feedback, phone calls, announcements, and discussion forums, all of which connected to Short, Williams, and Christie’s (1976) social presence theory, especially in online learning. In addition, social presence connected to professor communication in online learning because rapport and perspectives of communication mapped to the researcher’s theory that all modes correlate to student success in online courses. Students found when professors provided response rates within 12 to 24 hours, there was more engagement than previous experiences of professors who may not have responded as quickly. The faster a response rate, the more engaged the students felt they were with their professors, and there was a variety of positive outcomes for students who engaged in out-of-classroom communication (OCC) with their professors (Brooks & Young, 2016). Positive outcomes ranged from academic performance, students’ communication efforts, and time management. Brooks and Young (2016) found, “A long line of research in communication and education reinforces the many benefits of informal opportunities for conversation, information exchange, and

instructional support for students” (p. 237).

As for the connection to Knowles’ (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, learning habits and time management are traits for all learners, especially online adult learners who balance personal and professional obligations outside of college studies (Yoder, Mancha, & Smith, 2014). With online professor initiative to communicate with online adult learners, the students are set on a path to better communication efforts, time management, and learning habits, which has a direct correlation to student attendance, where more active communication motivates adult students to be more active in online courses (Snyder & Frank, 2016).

Situation to Self

I am an instructional designer, curriculum developer, and professor (on site, hybrid, and online) of English, communication, and humanities at a private four-year college (full-time job) that offers on-site and online undergraduate and graduate degrees. I also teach part-time as professor of English and communication at two community colleges and one university. I have over 14 years of experience teaching online and on-campus college courses at eight colleges/universities and over nine years of experience developing curriculum at three colleges. I am currently an online student in a Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program with the concentration of curriculum and instruction. My background is in teaching online courses while communicating frequently with my students. I witnessed in my own online courses that more communication from the professor results in stronger student communication and overall course scores. However, when researching the topic, a gap was found in the research from the experiences of the student perspective, which could gain insight for readers and researchers on/in many different levels and areas.

It was my goal to assist students in their online educational journeys and to understand

the importance of communication in higher education, online and on campus. My past experiences have driven me to better understand the experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses. I based this research on the frameworks of adult learning- andragogy and the theory of social presence (Knowles, 1980; Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). Epistemological assumptions stated the knowledge of the world was inevitably our own construction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This was the philosophical assumption that led me to the choice of research so I could get as close as possible to the participants being studied. In epistemology, “The researcher relies on quotes as evidence from the participant as well as collaborates, spends time in field with participants, and becomes an ‘insider’” (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This coincides with my study as I planned to understand the students’ experiences of professor communication while taking online courses.

What will guide this study is a social constructivism paradigm, which means a world view that has helped the researcher shape the study, and its focus was on individuals seeking an understanding of where they work (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). With social constructivism, truth was a matter of interpretation of reality, not an absolute truth, facts have no meaning except within some value framework, and causes and effects do not exist except by individual interpretation (Patton, 2015). As an English and communication professor, I recognize increased scores and better performance of students with increasing communication efforts from years ago. Previous students stated they were encouraged by my communication and positive words during difficult times. This phenomenological study helped explore the students’ experiences of professor communication in online instruction and how the communication impacted their educational journeys.

Problem Statement

Because it is important for educators to communicate with their students to enhance learning (Vygotsky, 1980), which is needed for on-campus and online coursework, the problem is students need improved effective communication from their online professor throughout an entire course (Kaufmann, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Ringler et al., 2015). Kaufmann, Sellnow, and Frisby (2016) claimed there are a variety of differences between traditional and online courses beyond the method of content delivery; online professors must consider the limitations and constraints that are not necessarily present in a face-to-face course. As for improving communication in asynchronous online instruction, this is an important study because it can inspire and encourage an improved professor's online social presence. The difference it can make is by improving undergraduates' experiences of learning and involvement. Professors need to take steps to ensure they are engaging not only in discussion forums but also in general communication with students (Ringler et al., 2015). In addition, online exchange in higher education courses has been a tool in education for over 20 years and has employed a wide range of educational levels and contexts (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). However, one must not assume students will always be the ones who initiate communication. Professors should always have an active role in the communication exchange in online instruction (O'Dowd, 2018). Verbally, online professors can provide video and audio lectures for students, as well as communicate with them via telephone conversation. To confirm, Harris et al. (2016) claimed, "Oral communication skills are essential for university graduates in their future roles as informed citizens and effective professionals" (p. 592). In this study, the researcher plans to extend Knowles' principles of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's social presence theory by focusing on the correlation of students and their

professors' communication efforts in a higher education online learning environment (Knowles, 1980; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. At this stage of the research, professor communication will be generally defined as a process of information exchange between the professor and student (Croucher & Cronn-Mills, 2015). The theories guiding this study are Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory as they correlate the need for professor communication with social presence and adult learning since communication can impact academic success for adult learners.

Significance of the Study

In this study, contributions were described in this study that can make to the knowledge base of professor communication in online instruction at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. First, focus on student experiences of online professor communication will add to previous studies to find common themes of these experiences during a full online semester, as there is a gap in understanding the experiences of online college students' perceptions of professor multifaceted communication efforts. Next, online professor social presence effects on students and the connections this presence may create fills gaps in the literature, as this presence has been valued as vital (Adnan, 2018; Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018; Brooks & Young, 2016; Costley, 2016; Izmirli, 2017; Poquet et al., 2018). Finally, needed communicative techniques from online professors will contribute to the gap in the literature, as provided techniques are taught to online professors

(Borokhovski et al., 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Oliver, Kellogg, Townsend, & Brady, 2010; Rehn, Maor, & McConney, 2016), but an understanding of which actually benefit students and those that do not will be a true contribution.

This study's sample included 13 students who volunteered to participate. All participants were students who have attended at least one completed semester of college-level online coursework. From the theoretical positive, I based this study on Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory to examine and interpret the experiences of online communication between professor and student at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. By examining the experiences of this specific group of students, I hope this study will contribute to the body of research regarding online communication between professor and student, the effects it has on both, and the impact on adult learners' academic success. Current research studies state since the 1980s, distance education has been an instrumental part of education (Ringler et al., 2015). A current problem is students need improved effective communication from their professors through the duration of an entirely online course. More specifically, as online learning is becoming more popular in higher education (Ringler et al., 2015), it is important to study the experiences of the online college student population as it will continue to grow, and professors can see common traits of communication that are useful and not helpful in online learning. The results impact students and professors alike, as student grades can improve, as well as professor end-of-term evaluations and effective teaching and communication styles. More specifically, this study may provide new and valuable feedback, derived from student perspectives, about experiences of professor communication on student academic success. Future research can build upon this research study's findings. From a practical standpoint, this study could establish vital communication

techniques for professors to implement in their own online courses to increase student retention and academic success. The participants in this study are from a large urban community college in central North Carolina, so on a wider scale, the results from this study can affect change for community colleges and four-year universities, large or small, urban or rural, as the data obtained on online professor communication should be universal.

Empirical

From an empirical perspective, there have been research studies conducted and articles published on communication in college courses, face-to-face and online, and its effects on students. It is important for professors to communicate with their students to enhance learning within a course (Vygotsky, 1980). However, focusing on online coursework, poor student and professor participation levels in asynchronous courses have been partly attributed to the non-physical and low socially led online communication (Ramiszowski & Mason, 2004; Winiecki, 2003). Additionally, communication in online courses is essential to academic achievement and leads to helping students understand what professors want them to know, which is vitally important when students do not see their professors in a face-to-face, physical classroom (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; McCornack & Ortiz, 2017; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013). However, even though online exchange in higher education has been used for over 20 years (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016), it cannot always be assumed students will initiate the communication efforts (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). Therefore, communication between online professors and students is a vital issue that should be addressed (Lu, 2011). This is significant to the study because exploring students' experiences of communication in online courses can determine needs for future research but also commonalities in which professors should or should not use in their courses. This study will add to the existing

body of literature because there is a gap in understanding the experiences of online college students' perceptions of professor multifaceted communication efforts.

Theoretical

With theoretical significance referring to how probable or statistically significant an event can take place (Moustakas, 1994), for this study, it will test that frequent communication efforts from professors to adult students will have a positive impact on the latter. The theories of adult-learning- andragogy (Knowles, 1980) and social presence (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) will guide this study as it examines adult learners' experiences of professor communication in online college courses. A social presence is significant in online courses to ensure students understand course content, and one vital way to ensure this is through communication (Costley, 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012). From empirical research, experiences show a positive impact, but theoretically, it can be assumed experiences can be the norm. The theoretical significance for this study is that professor communication should be multifaceted and continuous to help students succeed in online courses.

Practical

Referring to the empirical impact of the phenomenon in real life (Moustakas, 1994), the word "practical" is an understatement of how much professor communication can positively impact a student in online instruction. Showing the correlation between students' experiences with professor communication and its effects will hopefully show practical outcomes for all professors in the present and future. Communication can impact a students' academic success (Cahill, 2014); therefore, the practical significance is that professors should communicate with students in different ways to help ensure success in online courses.

By examining the experiences of the participants in the study, the researcher hopes it will contribute to the body of research regarding students' experiences of professor communication efforts in online instruction. This study will have the opportunity to give new and rich feedback from students' experiences about professor communication in online courses. From this viewpoint, this study can create implications for the quantity and quality of communication a professor should implement while teaching online courses.

Research Questions

Four research questions will guide this qualitative phenomenological study on the experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The central question will focus on communication experiences in an online college learning environment. The second question will be designed to get an understanding of the social presence of professors and how students describe its value. The third question will be centered on experiences with a professor's online social presence and its effects on overall course performance. Finally, the fourth question will request feedback from the participants on what techniques they believe online professors should use to assist all students during an academic term.

CRQ: How do online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment?

There is research on multiple experiences of online students, from grading feedback, learning new online platforms, time management, group work, etc., but there is a gap in a phenomenological design focusing on professor communication in online instruction. There have been findings with professor-to-student communication impacting students positively in quality and quantity, especially in online courses, as well as with high-risk students (Hawkins et

al., 2013). Findings show that communication, in general, can assist students to understand what is expected from the professor, especially in online courses, making it essential to student accomplishments (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017). Finally, in general, students view professor communication to be most important in online courses, so a phenomenological design can dig deeper into the experiences of online community college students (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017).

SQ1: How do online students describe online social presence connecting professor and student in an online course?

The art of communication is one of the most important traits an online college professor should possess, and this establishes a social presence (Adnan, 2018). This question is designed to explore the experiences of how social presence connected the student and professor. From the student perspective, quantitative studies show that professor initiating a social presence online to be most important (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). In addition, students also viewed professor using email to communicate to be important, but the timeliness of replies is more important, and if email is the sole means of communication, it has negative implications; however, students note timeliness for email replies from the professor to be important (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). When there is a delay in professor replies, students have a negative view of the course and professor (Beese, 2014; Lu, 2011). Understanding experiences from students in this study could confirm and build to these findings.

SQ2: How do online students describe experiences with a professor's online social

presence and its effects on overall course performance?

Research provides statistics on communication and course final grades, but this study is designed to understand the experiences that connects a social presence with course performance. Social presence is important, as online students view professor communication as most essential (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). Previous research emphasized the importance for professors to reach out to students, even if they are not making progress, which suggests a social presence should never end (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015). In addition, it was found that email as the only method of communication negatively impacts course grades (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). Finally, a quantitative study provided positive results for final course grades, and there is a social presence between professors and students (Brooks & Young, 2016; Costley, 2016). This phenomenological study will focus on experiences, rather than quantitative data, which may confirm, contradict, or add to these findings.

SQ3: How do online students describe communicative techniques a professor should utilize to assist students throughout the term?

Previous students have provided statistical data to show there are multiple communication techniques in college courses, but this study will explore the experiences of online students to see what should be used to assist students on a daily and/or weekly basis. Students from previous studies have shown email as the most popular means of communication, but professors need to make sure they reply in a timely manner to avoid a negative impact on student achievement (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). Students deem written communication more valuable than telephone conversation

(Belair, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012). However, using multiple mean of communication is preferred, such as social media, phone calls, and text messages (Cakiroglu & Erdemir, 2019; Hew, 2015).

Definitions

Key terms relating to the experiences of the participants and phenomenon will be used during this study. The researcher will give these definitions as follows for clarity.

1. *Communication* - The process through which individuals send and receive messages through different channels (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017)
2. *Asynchronous learning* –Student learning which takes place at different places and times (Reese, 2014).
3. *Community colleges* – Traditionally, two-year post-secondary institutions of higher learning which offers noncredit courses and workforce and university transfer academic programs (Boggs, 2011)
4. *Online courses* – Courses that have at least 80% of the content delivered in an online format, which makes online courses different from on-campus, web-based, and hybrid courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010).
5. *Traditional students* – Students who traditionally attend college or university shortly after completing high school and are between the ages of 18–24. Age is the most common predictor of a traditional student (Yoder, Mancha, & Smith, 2014).

Summary

During this chapter, the researcher provided a background for the problem defined by the concisely-defined literature review. A research into the literature showed there is a gap in the current research, specifically, an insufficient understanding of the experiences of college

professor communication in online courses. Current research studies suggested since the 1980s, distance education has been a vital element in education (Beck, 2017). It has also been proven professors should use multiple means of communication to help increase an online student's success (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014). Additionally, with the study of communication, the perceptions of communication from students and professors, learning habits, and time management, there is a significant gap in understanding, from a phenomenological approach, the experiences of students who received different types and amounts of communication from their professors in online courses. The goal of this phenomenological study is to fill this gap and open the door for future students in this area.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. At times, online college students feel a disconnect with their peers and professors during their course experience (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011). Students need to be in an educational environment where the professors are engaged and nurturing during the learning process because without this connectivity, there can be negative results on academic student success (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011).

This chapter provides a review of the literature with a focus on the experiences of community college professor communication in asynchronous online courses. It provides a theoretical understanding of communication, as well as related literature on its use by professors and students in online courses. This body of knowledge, while helpful to researchers studying communication, highlights the literature gap that exists concerning the need for improving online professor communication efforts to increase student success. The theories framing this inquiry are Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. Boling et al. (2012) stated, "When students experience a sense of disconnect, they describe their learning experiences as being less enjoyable, less meaningful, less helpful, and more frustrating than those individuals who make more personal connections and interactions in their academic courses" (p. 121). The researcher will develop this literature reviewing by using a variety of resources, which include The Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and EBSCOhost. This review of the literature will cover topics that provide a foundation of rationale for the researcher's current study, and these topics are

community college students, communication, rapport, its perspectives from students and professors, time management, preparing online professors, and learning habits, and how these factors may influence student success from professor communication in online community college courses.

Theoretical Framework

Most of the research on professor communication in online instruction is grounded in the conceptual framework of Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. The model and theories will help examine and interpret the experiences of online communication between professor and student to determine commonalities from the experiences of online community college students in an urban central North Carolina school of higher education. By examining these experiences, this study will contribute to the body of knowledge of online professor communication and its effects on adult learners.

Social Presence

This phenomenological study will help explore the students' experiences of how professor communication in online instruction impacted their educational journey. Social presence is a particularly important part of online education (Adnan, 2018; Brooks & Young, 2016; Costley, 2016). Social presence theory fuels this study, which was originally defined as, "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), and this definition has been modernized by Gunawardena (1995) to read, "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication." This theory was created by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), as its approach was deemed the groundwork for other theories on medium

effects. The theory states that a medium's social effect is caused by the amount of social presence received by others. Social presence is known as the communicator's awareness of the presence of a communication partner. However, focus on emotional connection between sender and receiver is on one end and focus on a communicator being perceived as "present" or "there" to be on the other end, much like online professors and students (Lowenthal, 2010).

According to Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), social presence consisted of two main concepts: immediacy (Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968) and intimacy (Argyle & Dean, 1965). Intimacy in communication is affected by factors, such as eye contact, smiling, physical distance, and personal conversation topics (Argyle & Dean, 1965). Immediacy is defined as a measure of psychological distance between the communicator and the object of his/her communication (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017; Wiener & Mehrabian, 1968). Both correlate to online communication in college courses, due to the physical distance and personal topics of conversation (intimacy) and the psychological distance between professor and student (immediacy).

Theory of Andragogy

Educators view students as self-directed individuals who seek after lifelong learning experiences (Knowles, 1980). Andragogy is defined as the practice of educating adults how to learn. Although, there is some variation in the research pertaining to the definition, such as age criteria of an adult student. Knowles (1980), though, defines an adult learner as someone who acts like an adult, demonstrates adult roles, and uses an adult self-concept. There are three focuses of andragogy: meet the goals and needs of each student, higher education institutions, and society (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980; Loeng, 2017).

The theory of andragogy emphasizes the methods and practices of teaching adult students. The foundation of this theory is that adult students need to understand the “why” in needing to learn versus any other question (Knowles, 1980). These students need to realize the responsibility they must take for their life and educational choices (Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015). What the adult student is and the person he/she yearns to become in the future will always mold student experience and learning (Conklin, 2012; Hougaard, 2013; Knowles, 1980; Loeng, 2017). The theory of andragogy focuses on six beliefs and practices for adult students: the need to know, the student’s self-concept, the role of experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learn, and motivation (Knowles, 1980, 2012). This provides professors and adult students a model that follows the principles of student-centered learning. This theory centers on this study because all students studied will be an adult learner who will continue to accumulate academic experiences, specifically for this study as online professor communication.

Application to Study

There are numerous studies that support the theories of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) and Knowles (1980, 2012) and have been established in academia (Gunawardena, 1995; Isenberg, 2007; McCornack & Ortiz, 2017; Rachal, 2002) as guides to theory and practices connecting to higher learning and communication. This study will be designed to further develop each theory by applying them to online community college students who have at least one semester of online college course experience. In this study, the theories of adult learning-andragogy and social presence will link to the research questions to interpret data from rich personal student experiences of online professor communication in a community college environment.

Related Literature

From the 1980s, people have been intrigued by the possibility to earn an education away from a physical classroom. Distance education courses started as mail-order correspondence back in the 1980s (Kentor, 2015; Lease & Brown, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Anna Ticknor created The Society to Encourage Studies at Home (SESH) as an educational expansion, which has changed through the years, but it has not ceased (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). During this time, the University of Chicago started a work-from-home program that, like SESH, utilized the postal service to send and receive classroom work correspondence (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Greenway & Vanourek, 2006).

Even though the distance education delivery methods have changed over the years, earning a college degree without stepping into a physical classroom is here to stay. The pioneers of distance education provided a spark and educational trend, which now becomes a popular option for students. Through the years when technology changed, distance education course delivery methods changed as well (Cavanaugh, 2009). Distance education classes transformed from mail-order communication courses to those delivered via radio technology (Kentor, 2015; Lease & Brown, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Due to the invention and popularity of television, radio technology courses were replaced by televised distance education courses, which soon provided video courses that used postal mail and the television (Kentnor, 2015; Lease & Brown, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012). Today, students still love distance education classes, but video cassette, television, and radio courses have transitioned to the use of computers and the Internet (Kentnor, 2015; Lease & Brown, 2009; Moore & Kearsley, 2012).

Previously, non-traditional education was mostly for either college-level or adult programs (Borup et al., 2013). In 1991, however, Laurel Springs in California became the first

virtual high school, and programs completed by students were solely online (Barbour, 2010; Greenway & Vanourek, 2006; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). In the later 1990s, Utah and Florida were added to the mix, as they offered online high school courses (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Greenway & Vanourek, 2006). Today, there is at least one online school in each US state, and there is a continuous growth in enrollment (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Kim, Park, Cozart, & Lee, 2015). In fact, there was over a 50% increase in K-12 online course participation between 2007 and 2009 (Morgan, 2015). Many of these courses were on the secondary level, and some middle school online courses were open to students with asynchronous and synchronous methods available (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Oliver, Osbourne, Patel, & Kleiman, 2009).

Online course offerings have substantially increased through the years, and they are continuously increasing (Beck, Maranto, & Lo, 2014; Kim, Park, Cozart, & Lee, 2015). By 2020, it is predicted that half of all high school students will take a course online, and the number of students who attend a course online is hypothesized to be greater than those attending in the physical classroom (Morgan, 2015; Toppin & Toppin, 2016). Because of this, it is suggested that online education will be present for the foreseeable future, which means effective online teaching is important.

As online education is becoming increasingly popular with colleges across the country (Allen & Seaman, 2010), the opportunity to earn a college degree while balancing employment, a family, and other obligations provide students an avenue to work at their own pace. With the increase in use of online courses, colleges and universities are tasked with filling online classes with professors (Adnan, 2018; Cahill, 2014). However, not all professors belong in the online environment. Some can adapt, while some may be more successful in a physical classroom

(Amirault, 2012; Harting & Erthal, 2005). McPhail (2018) claimed:

A central concern of community college leaders for the past decade has been the goal of replenishing the community college leadership pipeline. This is a growing realization that our community colleges, with their ever more diverse populations, cannot ultimately succeed if we fail to attract and retain qualified leaders. (p. 362)

However, it was argued that administration, staff, and professors are vital and central to an academic institution's school effectiveness (Arghode, Brieger, & Wang, 2018; Pheki & Linchwe, 2008, p. 399). With an ever-growing trend in online education, colleges need to make sure, though, they retain the right professors and leaders for this shift from predominantly on-site instruction to the online environment (Adnan, 2018; Arghode, Brieger, & Wang, 2018). One of the most important traits an online college professor must possess is the art of communication (Adnan, 2018). There are different perspectives and perceptions of professor communication in online instruction, and time management and learning habits should also be considered when communicating.

Community College Students

Community colleges serve students with a vast amount of personal needs (Boggs, 2011; Lundberg, 2014). In many ways, community college students differ from those of four-year universities and colleges (Jurgens, 2010; McClenny, 2013). To support this claim, a higher percentage of community college students attend developmental English and math classes, opposed to four-year students (Karp & Bork, 2014, Townsend & Twombly, 2007). Freshmen students do not often possess the skills needed to succeed in college. They find it difficult to adjust to independence, and they do not possess motivation and self-discipline to succeed.

Therefore, the need for social (communicative) and academic support is important to assist them in achieving academic success (Balduf, 2009; Lundberg, 2014; Renzulli, 2015).

In 2015, over 13 million students attended community colleges in the United States, which accounted for over 46% of undergraduate students, while 41% of community college students were the first of their respected families to attend college (AACC, 2015). These first-generation college students can be void of the guidance and communication needed from others to be successful in their college paths (Everett, 2015). Even though students face these challenges, most of the research that centers on higher learning focus on online students who attend four-year universities and colleges.

Although many community colleges have students who enroll directly out of high school after earning a diploma, many community college students are deemed nontraditional students, which has changed the profile of a traditional American student in the last century (Boggs, 2011; Jurgens, 2010; McClenny, 2013). Even though there is no specific definition of a nontraditional student, the term must consider the student's financial dependence, employment status, age, and possible delay of college enrollment (Choy, 2002; Hoyt et al., 2010). A student at least 25 years of age is the most popular predicting measure of being a nontraditional student (Choy, 2002; Hoyt et al., 2010). Many of these students raise children and have other obligations while enrolled in community colleges, so many can only attend on a part-time capacity and elect to take courses online, if offered (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2009; Townsend & Towmbly, 2007).

As community colleges continue to change to meet the needs of not only the traditional, but also nontraditional students, these colleges and faculty must understand challenges students face and the need for effective communication in all courses, especially those online (Jurgens,

2010; McClenny, 2013). Professors and administrators should be held accountable for the communication efforts used in online courses, which take part in the success of students (Castillo, 2013; Fike & Fike, 2008).

Communication

It is vital for educators to communicate to enhance a student's learning (Vygotsky, 1980). There are a variety of differences between traditional and online courses beyond the method of content delivery, and online professors must consider the limitations and constraints that are not necessarily present in a face-to-face course because "teaching online means conducting a course partially or entirely through the Internet" (Kaufmann, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2016, p. 307).

Developing Internet technologies may help circumvent departmental scheduling problems and help promote professors' collaboration. Online discussion forums (or sometimes known as discussion boards) have been considered as one of these Internet technologies, as they provide a collaborative area for students and professors to share with one another by defeating time and space barriers (Anderson & Kanuka, 1997). Aside from dealing with schedule issues, online discussion forums also supply professors and students a superior method of reflection and communication. Providing extra time for professors to read messages to articulate thoughts allows them to be more reflective in their dialogues, which can result in a positive influence on the quality of information exchange. Professors and students can then both gain more meaningful insights from these detailed online messages. These online forums can lead to richer reflective communication and enhance opportunities for professors to improve and collaborate on student assignments (Davis & Resta, 2002; Dede, 1997; Dede, 2004; Hawkes & Ramiszowski, 2001; Leach, 2002). However, there could be problems associated with online collaboration. Although online collaboration has many benefits for students and professors,

there may be issues with practicality and effectiveness of collaboration techniques. There have been insufficient participation levels in asynchronous online courses because of the non-physical and low socially-cued online communication (Ramiszowski & Mason, 2004; Winiecki, 2003). In other words, students may be viewed as less socially engaged in their online courses as opposed to on-campus, in-person communication because of this asynchronous environment; although, it is not guaranteed information exchanged to and from professors are elaborated and detailed because of active participation (Anderson & Terry, 1998; Gunewardane et al., 1997).

Communication in any means could help people understand what others want them to know, and it is especially important in online instruction where students do not see their professors in a physical classroom (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017). Communication in an online classroom is essential to student academic achievement (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013). This was confirmed in a study on improving students' experiences of online education by combining learning with professor interactions, and online interactions with professors helped students understand course material, assignment instructions, and professor expectations (Tsai & Shen, 2013). Online exchange in higher education courses has been a tool in education for over 20 years and has employed a wide range of educational levels and contexts (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016). However, one must not assume students will always be the ones who initiate communication (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016). In another study, it was found that professors should always have an active role in the communication exchange in online instruction, and professors need to communicate often with depth so students feel they are important in class (O'Dowd, 2018; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016). When communication occurs, students understand more completely, which again leads to higher academic achievement, as verbal communication is

important for university students and their future roles as citizens and professionals (Costley, 2016; Harris et al., 2016).

Additionally, professor-to-student communication positively affects students in quality and quantity, and in online courses, there is greater impactful importance for high-risk students, as well as those without this label (Hawkins et al., 2013). Online professors sometimes falsely believe students do not want or need interaction (Hawkins et al., 2013); however, the quantity and quality of professor interactions with students have been directly linked to a student's course completion (Hawkins et al., 2013). Professor contact in online courses during the first few days was found to be vitally important, as students are more inclined to participate in their course during this timeframe (Hawkins et al., 2013). Therefore, online professors reaching out to students is important, even if student progress in class is low (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015).

Communication between professors and students is one of the most important issues that should be fixed (Lu, 2011). Ingerham (2012) found when a professor is not available, this decreases the student's success in online learning. Additionally, Beese (2014) found that students view their professors as non-responsive to communication efforts when professors view students to be non-responsive to their communication efforts. This leads students to view professors negatively when a time delay is present from professor replies and interactions (Beese, 2014; Lu, 2011). Although, professors may not understand the importance of fast reply time frames to online students' communication efforts (Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, & Lauer, 2016). However, Borup et al. (2013) proved from a study that students' improvement was significantly correlated to reported times a professor interacted with them regarding online course content.

Muir et al. (2019) conducted a study on student engagement in online course work over the period of an entire semester and found three key factors that affect student activity: assessment, lecturer presence, work/life commitments. During assessment time of a semester (midterm and final exams), students felt like focus was on passing the exams instead of being engaged with the material (Muir et al., 2019). In addition, professors should be a social presence in the online classroom, as a facilitator and engaging component, to spark enhanced thoughts during each unit (Muir et al., 2019). In online learning, students have many degrees of social presence, based on how they contribute to class, which is mimicked, at times, by how much professors contribute to course activities, such as discussions, feedback on assignments, returned emails, and other communication efforts (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017). The more of a social presence a professor has in class links to the amount of social presence a student can maintain, which has a direct correlation to academic achievement and success (Lowenthal & Dennen, 2017).

Social presence is defined as “a perceived sense of something being present or ‘real,’ and students view this presence differently by three key factors: course, instructor, and methods of interaction” (Poquet et al., 2018). Social presence involves three categories: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Izmirli, 2017). The ability for students to express themselves without judgement is important, as it will likely provide the avenue for them to open up more frequently, which will then provide them the desire to contribute more often to course discussion topics (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018; Izmirli, 2017). Open communication is also important because time cannot be a constraint during a course week, as students balance jobs, family, and education; the ability to communicate asynchronously in an open environment offers students the chance to contribute to

a virtual conversation how they see fit (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018; Izmirli, 2017). Finally, group cohesion is established when social presence is available, especially when professors put students in small groups; although, research shows a course-wide communication system also sees cohesions when social presence is available (Izmirli, 2017). To enhance social presence and engagement in online courses, professors can do more than merely communicate with students on a regular basis. They can, when possible, provide learning materials accessible at the start of a semester instead of just a week-by-week basis to spark engagement, which allows students to move at their own pace (Muir et al., 2019; Mykota, 2015). Professors can also make sure all online modules are logically sequenced and mapped to enhance and encourage student engagement throughout a course (Muir et al., 2019; Mykota, 2015), and they can avoid making impulsive assignments/activities timebound, as the lack of preparation time can decrease student engagement and communication (Muir et al., 2019; Mykota, 2015).

When a professor's written communication efforts are consistent, students value it more than verbal/phone communication efforts (Belair, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012). One professor found instant messaging the best communicative technique to contact online students, while other professors only used email (Belair, 2012). Two other avenues of online course communication that are proven effective are blogs and discussion boards/forums (Kerr, 2011).

When developing curriculum, using a self-service learning technique could negatively impact a student's performance if there is no additional professor communication (Mangan, 2012). Because of this, student perceptions in online courses found that students placed a high value on professor communicative timeliness, and it was deemed that over 80% of the student participants in a study indicated professor communication timeliness should be within 24 hours

(Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). However, it was understood that last-minute communication efforts of a student nearing a weekly deadline may not receive return communication from the professor by this deadline (Barnett, 2016). Communication from the professor throughout the week, however, will help remind students of deadlines and decrease last-minute communication efforts near weekly deadlines of work submissions (Costley, 2016; Reese, 2015).

There is no literature that directly discusses communication patterns of online students and professors, which leads to a claim that determining these patterns may allow professors to alter their own communication to better meet the needs of the student (Costley, 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012). Student perceptions in classrooms influence their decision to seek out and communicate with professors, and this goes beyond the in-classroom setting, as it extends to online course work (Brooks & Young, 2016). Additionally, with minimal to no communication by online students, professors have fewer avenues to connect with their students, compared to students on campus and their instructional experiences (Brooks & Young, 2016). There are a variety of positive results and outcomes for students who do engage in communication with their professors (Brooks & Young, 2016; Costley, 2016). Brooks and Young (2016) also claimed, “A long line of research in communication and education reinforces the many benefits of informal opportunities for conversation, information exchange, and instructional support for students” (p. 237). This connects to student motivation, the understanding of learning styles, and time management. Finally, Brooks and Young (2016) found in their study that excuses for subpar work submissions, late submissions, or no submissions were more frequently the reasons students were motivated to communicate with their professors.

Rapport

Rapport is defined by Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares (2012) as, “a mutual phenomenon characterized by mutual attentiveness, mutual respect, mutual openness, mutual attention, and mutual understanding” (p. 168). The rapport between professors and students is an important element of higher education (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). When a professor can establish rapport with students in a course, students are more likely to attend class and be engaged in the course content (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005). Positive rapport between professors and students is connected to the opportunity for intellectual and emotional learning (Frisby & Martin, 2010). While students take courses online with minimal or no visual engagement with professors, rapport is one of the most important characteristics needed in any course, as it connects to increased enthusiasm, better attendance, more participation, and stronger learning outcomes (Granitz et al., 2009).

However, rapport can be difficult to establish, especially online, because of the physical location distance and time differences between the student and professor (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Building rapport with online students can pose a challenge for professors, as some students wish to not be contacted in any form (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). In addition, sometimes communication efforts can be taken out of context without the use of verbal tone and body language, which could negatively impact establishing rapport with students (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Finally, it was found some professors view distance education as the same as when they earned their degree(s), even though it has been documented that virtual education has progressed in many ways throughout the years (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

To establish this rapport, Granitz et al. (2009) present three factors that must be present:

approachability, personality, and homophily. Approachability is the degree in which a professor is available to students and the ease in which a student feels in communicating with the professor (Granitz et al., 2009). Personality is the psychological characteristic of the professor like attitudes and behaviors that students view as inviting (Granitz et al., 2009). Homophily is the similarity between the professors and students, as humans are connected and drawn to others with similarities (Granitz et al., 2009). When all three factors are present, students and professors connect in a way that strengthens rapport, which increases student success (Benson, Cohen, & Buskist, 2005).

In distance education, there are six categories to rapport building (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Recognizing the student is essential to understanding how to build rapport, as it will increase the personal connection between online professors and students (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Supporting and monitoring is the second category of rapport importance as it is essential for professors to encourage and monitor student progress in positive means during an online course (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Third, professors being available, accessible, and responsive are all vital to building rapport with online students, as professors need to be interactive with students and respond in ways that help engage them with methods to assist in figuring out academic challenges (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Non text-based interactions are important to rapport building, such as phone calls and live virtual communication efforts, which can replace the face-to-face, in-classroom interactions of a traditional college course (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Fifth, the tone of online professor interactions can play a role in rapport as nonverbal communication can sometimes portray opposite intentions of the professor

(Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Using emoticons like a smiley face or the use of follow-up questions can sometimes help eliminate the wrong student interpretations from professor communication, which can then build rapport between student and professor (Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012). Finally, non-academic conversation sets the most beneficial standard for rapport between student and professor, as general conversation about current events, family activities, and acceptable personal matters of the professor and/or student can enhance a connection that carries over into the academic content of a course (Lammers & Gillaspy, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

Communication Perceptions

For teaching presence and communication timeliness in asynchronous online courses, professors need to have more of a communicative presence (Cladha, 2018; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012). The more ways in which online professors communicate in a course, as well as the number of times they communicate, this combination enhances student success (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Watson, Watson, Richardson, & Loizzo, 2016). Professors cannot rely on students to always ask questions for assignment clarity or understanding a grade, so timely communication with multiple methods pick up the slack of lack of student communication (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Cladha, 2018; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012).

Asynchronous video can help improve an online social presence and establish effective communication patterns in online instruction (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). By providing lecture material for students to review at their leisure, it can positively impact student achievement and provide the same in-class lecture feel for students because they are receiving the same information as on-site students (Borup, West, &

Graham, 2012; Mirick, 2016; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). Using voice thread when grading also helps a student understand feedback, especially for auditory learners because on occasion, students can misinterpret the comments and feedback from the professor due to the absence of vocal tone, so being able to hear from the professor auditorily can decrease the likelihood a student may misinterpret meaning from the feedback (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Miller, 2014; Mirick, 2016).

In order to maximize student success in online courses, professors should use multiple communication methods, and the most effective from a study were emails, bi-weekly or weekly conferences, phone calls, texts, and one-on-one synchronous virtual meetings with students, and these provide a wide array of communication avenues to help students understand assignment material, as well as ask other questions (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Coy and Hirschmann, 2014). These can also provide clarification of professor expectations (Borup, West, & Thomas, 2015; Mirick, 2016). Effective written communication is important for any college professor and student, but in online education, it is especially critical for use (Betts, 2009). Feedback on graded assignments, emails, and text message communication are just three popular examples of how students can receive written communication from professors (Tubbs & Moss, 2006). Written online communication provides nonverbal cues like capital vs. lowercase letters, punctuation marks, spacing, text lingo, and emojis to convey meanings or express feelings. Additionally, videos, photos, and images can be added to these written communication efforts to add more meaning, which, like poetry, provides meaning for the recipients, as opposed to the words that precede the reaction from the sender (Tubbs & Moss, 2006). Although not all text messages intend to convey a certain meaning, they do make a lasting impression on the recipient who interprets the meaning for himself/herself. In addition to texting, mobile phones can be

used for verbal communication, allowing professors and students to interact during synchronous discussions anywhere they have cell phone reception.

Online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams have proven to be a successful place for students and faculty to communicate amongst one another (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018; Izmirli, 2017). As one in four current college students are taking at least one online course (Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018), using multiple methods of communication, in addition to the traditional online classroom, professors can enhance communication efforts, which extends the rapport between students and professors and amongst students themselves, as well as the social presence from all parties (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2018; Baisley-Nodine, Ritzhaupt, & Antonenko, 2018; Izmirli, 2017; Thomas, West, & Borup, 2017). Extra avenues of communication, such as Twitter, Facebook, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, provide a community of inquiry, one in which professors who even teach face-to-face should inherit to enhance the quality and frequency of community efforts from students, which directly correlates to academic achievement (Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015; Thomas, West, & Borup, 2017). In a study by Akcaoglu and Lee (2018), they found the use of Facebook groups to be vital as mode of social presence and results show students are more positive regarding social presence with their professors and peers, and they perceive the online course as having more sociability than others that did not use Facebook groups. Sociability affects a student's social presence, which can enhance as professors establish and maintain their initial social presence in class (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Bentley, Secret, & Cummings, 2015; Thomas, West, & Borup, 2017).

From a study, it was noted that professors need to take steps to ensure they are engaging in discussion forums, but also general communication with students because it should not be

assumed all students will reach out to their professors when there is a question or needed clarification (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Mirick, 2016; Ringler et al., 2015; Watson, Waston, Richardson, & Loizzo, 2016). Many students choose the online route to education because they have many non-academic obligations (Allen & Seaman, 2010), and at times a quick, simple question may not be asked because of their busy schedules (Amirault, 2012; Harting & Erthal, 2005). Taking initiative, professors' communication efforts can help these busy students to ensure all is understood, regarding coursework (Chadha, 2018; Mirick, 2016; Watson, Waston, Richardson, & Loizzo, 2016).

Professor Perspective of Communication

It has been hypothesized by researchers that reduced online participation and surface-level messaging from professor to student are caused by a professor's lack of time and even Internet access (Hawkes & Good, 2000; Meyers, et al. 2002; Stephens & Hartmann, 2002). Although, these factors can be controlled by giving professors better online tools and accommodate their schedules each day, there is no assurance of an increase of high-level professor communication.

Assisting professors with their dialogue will positively impact their online participation and communication content, and studies show professors post more to a discussion when there is a mentor or facilitator to ask questions and provide prompts (Carboni, 1999; Pomeroy, 1997). Another study proved that when mentors motivate professors to communicate in discussion forums and create new threads for discussion, there is an increase in communication from all stakeholders (Caggiano et al., 1995). Likewise, Yang and Liu (2004) provided there are also effects of assisting professors' online discussion when they proved the absence of properly structured scaffolding impacts a professor's non-reciprocating entry-level message content. Also,

the professor's view of assistance by mentors impacts the comfort level in discussion boards and frequency patterns of online participation (Yang & Liu, 2004).

Professors' perspectives of communication effectiveness are important, and those who use multiple methods of communication like modeling, scaffolding, coaching, articulating, reflecting, just to name a few, see an increase of student performance and motivation (Boling et al., 2014; Burns, Houser, & Farris, 2018; Collins, Groff, Mathena, & Kupcynski, 2019). Contacting students regularly helps them become more comfortable reaching out to their professors when they have questions or comments. In addition, professors view their feedback to students as a communication strategy (Howard, Khosroneiad, & Calvo, 2017; Richardson, Besser, Koehler, Lim, & Strait, 2016, p. 90). Also, professors who created course biographies and announcements with an approachable tone made it more likely for students to communicate during the term (Lewandowski, van Barneveld, & Ertmer, 2016; Richardson, Besser, Koehler, Lim, & Strait, 2016). Professors need to vary the process (communication) and content (class material) to meet the needs of the students' interests, academic needs, and independent and instructional levels; however, it is up to the professor to first attempt to understand these levels and needs to better assist the student in class, but also the best avenues in which to communicate (Burns, Houser, & Farris, 2018; Cooper, 2008).

Professors perceive communication as a direct correlation to student attendance, where more active communication motivates student activity in online courses (Collins, Groff, Mathena, & Kupcynski, 2019; Snyder & Frank, 2016). Participation in discussion forums and asking students questions easily generate student activity. Providing feedback on graded assignments with a question can also generate more active students, while also determining if students are reviewing feedback (Howard, Khosroneiad, & Calvo, 2017; Snyder & Frank, 2016).

Professors who use social media, such as Facebook, to interact and communicate with students, enhance student communication, motivation, and academic success (Borup, West & Thomas, 2015; Sarapin and Morries, 2015). Professors can create a Facebook page for his/her class where everyone can communicate and share brings communication to another level, especially since students are already using social media like Facebook, and it provides an alternative outlet for professors and students to communicate (Mirick, 2016; Sarapin and Morries, 2015).

Student Perspective of Communication

There has been great depth with higher education online instruction when claiming, “In a time when technology is changing daily, and a time when young people are often the most up-to-date with that new technology, students’ preferences for how they receive online course communication is apt to change often too” (Change, Hurst, & McLean, 2015, p. 40). Harris et al. (2016) confirmed this in a study when they found results showing students had stronger skills with technology than professors (p. 603). When surveyed, Chang, Hurst, and McLean (2015) found out of 213 online students, 97% preferred email communication efforts from professors, while 77% preferred course announcements at least once per week. In addition, from a student’s perspective, there is an increase of understanding academic assignments when professors utilize multiple means of communication each week in an online course (Boling et al., 2014; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). Students need more than one or two methods of communication, such as sending multiple announcements throughout the week, replying to students’ discussion postings, providing feedback on graded assignments, emailing, calling, and texting are just some of the avenues professors can use to more frequently communicate with their students (Boling et al., 2014; Cole, et al., 2017; Lee & Martin, 2017; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012). However, a major barrier to poor

or lack of communication between online professors and students was making mistakes, primarily from the student (Florescu & Pop-Pacurar, 2016; Gomez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernandez-Navarro, 2017). Students are also constantly challenged by questions and actively encouraged to give an answer, even if they might give the wrong answer or their response is not the most accurate one (Florescu & Pop-Pacurar, 2016, p. 47; McBain et al., 2016). Dickinson (2017) added, “Students in a traditional classroom setting respond positively to professors who treat them with dignity and seem approachable, even if those professors are more formal in their speech and demeanor” (p. 39).

Students view communication from the professor to be most important in an online course, and these professors need to have an active social presence (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). Long and Neff (2018) also claim, “Verbal communication is becoming an increasingly expected and necessary behavior for college students” (p. 223). Simply grading assignments and replying to email is not enough, as there needs to be more activity from the professor to the students, so all can stay engaged with one another (Cole, et al., 2017; Lee & Martin, 2017; Long & Neff, 2018; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012). It cannot be assumed the student will always communicate to the professor, so the professor needs to initiate the communication at times (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Gomez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernandez-Navarro, 2017; Hung & Chou, 2015). Students believe professors in their online courses are less encouraging and inviting when there is minimal communication during the week, and students are more motivated and engaged when there is constant communication throughout the week (Brooks & Young, 2016).

Students' perspectives of a professor using email to communicate to be positive; however, it was found that students noted timeliness for email replies to be important, and email as the sole means of communication negatively impacts their performance (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). However, during these email communication efforts, professors should be cognizant of tone, as the messages can be received differently than the expectation of the sender (Dickinson, 2017). This can result in negative communication efforts from the students, which can then transform into negative end-of-course scores and end-of-semester teacher evaluations (Dickinson, 2017).

Although the quality of messages is vital in online education, the quantity is also important, as using multiple avenues of communication is preferred, such as social media, phone calls, and text messages (Cakiroglu & Erdemir, 2019; Hew, 2015). Some professors use WhatsApp for students out of the country, so they do not accumulate fees from texting. Not communicating with a professor due to cost is not an issue with WhatsApp, as it is a free messaging service (Guler, 2017; Hew, 2015). Minimal communication due to this monetary reason negatively impacts a student's achievement. Finally, students perceive professor communication in online classes as extremely vital, as well as the curriculum development for a course to be designed and delivered with communication efforts being mandatory (McBain et al., 2016; Vallade and Kaufmann, 2018, p. 379).

Time Management

Time management is an important basic, functional life skill, but in the area of online education, it is essential (Margalina, Pablos-Heredero, & Montes-Botella, 2017; Wehman, 2006). In online coursework, time management is routinely viewed as what students need to possess in order to be successful; however, it must be used by both the student and professor (MacCann,

Fogary, & Roberts, 2012; Margalina, Pablos-Heredero, & Montes-Botella, 2017). It has also been noted that conscientiousness and GPA are mediated by time management, and to reach greater conscientiousness and higher academic achievement, time management strategies are important (MacCann, Fogary, & Roberts, 2012). Time management is defined as a set of habits and behaviors that can be trained for low-conscientious students and professors who do not manage their time automatically; in addition to this definition, it is easier to alter a person's time management skills than their personality (MacCann, Fogary, & Roberts, 2012).

Poor time management habits in young adulthood are linked to future poor time management later in life. When students learn poor time management during elementary, middle, and high school, this carries over in their higher education endeavors (Barnet, 2016; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015). During college, time management and communication are key factors for academic achievement, and if students do not possess these skills before college, it can be detrimental to their college experiences and could even affect future employment (Barnet, 2016; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015; MacCann, Fogary, & Roberts, 2012). Poor time management is one of two leading factors (fewer study hours) that predicts poor academic performance in college (Beattie et al., 2017). In connection, studying course material throughout a college term instead of cramming in the final days or weeks has a positive correlation to increased GPA (Hartwig & Dunlosky, 2012). Baker, Evans, Li, and Cung (2017) confirmed this in a study on time management affecting academic achievement when they found spacing out video lecture viewing throughout the term as opposed to procrastinating and cramming during the final few days, despite a popular thought of information fresh in mind will assist students during tests or quizzes.

Further, professors and students who do not manage their time well will find higher learning more difficult as many colleges are shifting to e-learning (Dye, 2015; MacCann, Fogary, & Roberts, 2012; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017; Richardson, et al., 2015). With e-learning affording students the ability to juggle college courses, job(s), and a family, it is detrimental to learn time management skills to be successful. Without these skills, a student will find many difficulties when trying to conduct and submit academic assignments (Margalina, Pablos-Herederro, & Montes-Botella, 2017). Lack of time management for teaching and learning has the potential to increase stress levels, which affects a student's and professor's wellbeing (Barnett, 2016, p. 1; MacArthur & Villagran, 2015). Students can easily get stressed if leaving work submissions until the last minute, and if extraneous factors occur that could prohibit a student from submitting work, it could result in zeros or low scores. These low scores can also lead to stress and a negative effect on a student's wellbeing.

Scheduling is one of the most important elements of time management for college students, as they balance social lives, extra-curricular activities, and academics while striving to earn a college degree (Baker, Evans, Li, & Cung, 2018). From a study, Baker, Evans, Li, and Cung (2018) found procrastination from online students seeking a four-year college degree as the number one deterrent being as successful as they were striving. The need for persistence during a work-at-your-own pace course is vital, and the lack of this personal characteristic affects overall course performance (Baker, Evans, Li, & Cung, 2018). One area that assists in the effectiveness of college success is reviewing all resources provided to students for each weekly unit, especially video lectures from the professor (Baker, Evans, Li, & Cung, 2018). These video lectures provide an alternative to the face-to-face classroom interactions between the professor

and students, and it lends useful information to assist students to achieve the highest academic standards for any particular online course unit/week/module (Baker, Evans, Li, & Cung, 2018).

Preparing Online Professors

As the online environment is quickly growing in the United States (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012), there is an increase in the demand for professors to teach online courses (Moore-Adams, Jones, & Cohen, 2016). However, few involved teacher education programs believe the focus should be placed on online instruction (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). This leaves many to believe teacher preparation programs that emphasize traditional, in-the-physical classrooms are suitable for the online environment (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). However, some professors found their on-site routine method of teaching did not prepare them well for the online environment (Rehn, Maor, & McConney, 2016). Due to the lack of training and preparation for online teaching, professors in these online courses mostly learn by trial and error (Hawkins et al., 2012). In fact, from a study, a minimal 1.3% of teacher education programs truly prepare professors to teaching online courses, and only 13% of these programs have intent to do so in the future (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Teacher program professors find it difficult to teach future professors how to teach online courses due to being uncomfortable with online pedagogy (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). Still, education is quickly changing from a traditional brick and mortar environment to online coursework, so teacher professor programs and administrators need to strongly consider the needs of online professors because these professors need to learn how to properly teach in online environments (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Watson et al., 2011).

Teachers on all levels of education should receive proper online pedagogy training or professional development to ensure they are prepared for teaching online courses (Watson et al.,

2011). Although some standards and learning objectives can apply to both traditional and online courses, there are many more applicable to one opposed to the other (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). For example, it is important to possess technology skills in both online and traditional settings, and it is vitally important for online professors (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Online professors need training in pedagogy, course content, and technology, but they also need know how to effectively blend the three components for their students (Moore-Adams, Jones, & Cohen, 2016). Not only do professors need to know the course curriculum, but they must also possess the technology skills to teach the curriculum to their students (Oliver, Kellogg, Townsend, & Brady, 2010). Additionally, professors need to know how to use different online tools, as well as the use of strategies to teach students in the online environment (Oliver, Kellogg, Townsend, & Brady, 2010).

With increased interest and popularity in online education, there is a vital need for professors who are properly trained to teach online courses (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). When teaching online students, merely knowing the technology is not enough. Professors need to thoroughly understand the technology and how to blend in their pedagogical understanding with this technology to have a chance to effectively teach course content (Rehn, Maor, & McConney, 2016). Teacher preparation programs need to focus on pedagogy and technology, even if the emergence of traditional brick and mortar schools to fully online is a difficult process because technology is a tool that is vitally important for professors to learn how to utilize effectively (Borokhovski et al., 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012).

Learning Habits

To effectively communicate with students, a professor needs to understand different learning habits and styles of students to better assist them to achieve academic success.

Professors find it intriguing in how productive learning strategies are developed because learning habits typically determine stronger academic performance. There are also varying differences in academic achievement due to motivation, because in an online environment, students can sometimes put off important assignments until close to deadlines, so motivation is an important trait for students to possess (Liu, Wang, Kee, Koh, Lim, & Chua, 2014). In reference to motivation in online instruction, students view convenience as the most frequent choice in the results from the study, and professors need to continually motivate students. One way is to communicate with them in an online setting (Costley & Lange, 2016; Jacobi, 2018; Moon-Heum & Cho, 2016; Moon-Heum & Scott, 2016). Further, a student's determination towards learning can be affected by a professor's understanding of a student's basic needs, and professors should strive to communicate with students to understand these basic needs of each student.

When professors teach self-management behaviors to students, there is an increase in pro-environmental behaviors, which increases academic success, so knowing how to motivate one's self is beneficial to online students because they can easily decide to postpone working on assignments due to the flexibility online course structures offer (Mosher & Descrochers, 2014). Motivation and time management are factors in a student's success in online courses, and professors should take the steps to communicate with students to help motivate them (Basila, 2014; Moon-Heum & Cho, 2016; Moon-Heum & Scott, 2016). It is true that professors cannot force students to complete their assignments, but motivation can help them understand the importance of avoiding procrastination, and they can then learn the value, so they will be more motivated for future assignments (Basila, 2014).

Shifting from student learning habits to professor learning habits, professors should set goals to master course content to achieve a deep, rich understanding (Sarwat & Irshad, 2013).

When professors master course content, they can, at times, understand areas in which students may struggle so they can then communicate with them how to best face possible challenges (Sarwat & Irshad, 2013). With the use of social media, students can get easily distracted, but by bringing technological components to the online classroom, professors can more effectively communicate with them and help them avoid procrastination (Barnett, 2016; Denker, Manning, Beuett, & Summers, 2018; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015). Using social media, such as Facebook, has been proven helpful because as students are already using it, they are more likely to communicate with their professors (Barnett, 2016; Denker, Manning, Beuett, & Summers, 2018; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015). However, students do not always have the same goal and passion for the professor's subject, so communication and encouragement can affect academic success (Small, 2014).

Summary

Within this chapter, the key components of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that guide this study were detailed. In the literature review, a gap in the literature was identified. Specifically, there is an insufficient understanding of the experiences of online college students who receive communication from their professors. Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory and Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy were theoretical foundations to understand this research. Additionally, nine topics relating to the phenomenon were presented in this literature review: (a) community college students, (b) communication, (c) rapport, (d) communication perspectives, (e) professor perspectives of communication, (f) student perspectives of communication, (g) time management, and (h) preparing online professors, (i) learning habits.

Online education is becoming increasingly popular at colleges and universities today, and the new age of education is now present. With this increase, online professors need to more frequently communicate with their students to ensure assignments are understood, as well as offer encouragement to the student. “Verbal communication can facilitate learning, academic performance, and a sense of belonging when students participate in classroom discussions, asks questions, seek help and speak with their professors outside of class” (Long & Neff, 2018, p. 223). As such, communication via only email is a thing of the past, as social media, phone calls, texting, WhatsApp, and other platforms can serve as communication avenues professors can use to reach out to students (Guler, 2017). Posting announcements to course home pages and even providing extensive feedback (written and auditory) on assignments can serve as strong and helpful avenues. Communication is extremely important, as it does correlate with time management and learning habits of the student and the online professor. The perspectives of communication from the professor and the student should always be considered, and at the end of the semester and/or academic calendar year, more frequent communication can increase student achievement in online instruction.

Current research studies suggest since the 1980s, distance education has been a vital element in education (Ringler et al., 2015). It has also been proven professors should use multiple means of communication to help increase an online student’s success (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014). Additionally, with the study of communication, the perceptions of communication from students and professors, learning habits, and time management, there is a significant gap in understanding, from a phenomenological approach, the experiences of students who received different types and amounts of communication from their professors in online

courses. The goal of this phenomenological study is to fill this gap and open the door for future students in this area.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. It was very important for educators to communicate to enhance a student's learning (Vygotsky, 1980). This was especially true for online coursework. The problem was created when there was a lack of communication from the professor because students need improved effective communication from the professor throughout an entire course (Kaufmann, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2016; O'Dowd, 2018; O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Ringler et al., 2015). This study used the conceptual framework of Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning-andragogy, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. To examine this phenomenon, I conducted a qualitative study using a transcendental phenomenological design in order to understand students' personal experiences. This chapter described the design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, researcher's role, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations that was used for this study.

Design

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The phenomenological method was the best choice for this study because it will determine commonalities found from student experiences of professor communication to encourage and inspire an improved professor's online social presence and communication efforts. To examine the essence of the participants' experience, I used a transcendental phenomenological design. This study was qualitative to determine the essence of

the phenomenon, rather than a numerical value from an assessment. For example, during a survey, a score can provide a numerical score, but the essence of “why” the score was received should be a focus to determine the reasons for the experiences (qualitative results). The purpose of a phenomenological study was to describe commonalities from participants’ lived experiences to determine rich meaning of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology is defined as all that comes from consciousness serves as basis for all knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). I defined the phenomenon of interest as students’ experiences of college professor communication in online courses. These students took the majority of their courses online at a large, urban community college in central North Carolina, so a qualitative research approach for this study was appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This proposed study used a qualitative design to seek students’ experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. Qualitative research designs use methodology including interpretive understandings of experiences, data collection methods that vary based on the situation, and both individual and synthesized themes (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). As participants detailed their experiences of the phenomenon, themes emerge and were accepted (Ritchie et al., 2014). Qualitative research uses words and images instead of numbers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), and it answers what, why, and how questions instead of the quantitative research focus of how many (Ritchie et al., 2014). While the power of numbers is the focus of quantitative research, qualitative research is strong because of the varied, rich descriptions used to convey participants’ experiences of the research topic (Mack, Woodson, MacQueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). Qualitative research provides understanding to complicated issues possibly missed by other research methods (Cooley, 2013).

Transcendental means, “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). Transcendental phenomenology draws on the Duquesne Studies in Phenomenological Psychology (e.g., Giorgi, 1985, 2009) and the data analysis procedures of Van Kaam (1966) and Colaizzi (1978). The procedures, illustrated by Moustakas (1994), consist of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out the researcher’s experiences, and collecting data from several persons who have experienced the phenomenon. The researcher then analyzes the data by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combines the statements into themes. The researcher seeks to discover commonalities and themes from these student experiences to produce new knowledge and understanding on the similarities of the students’ lived experiences. There are two types of phenomenology: transcendental and hermeneutical (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutical phenomenology, unlike transcendental phenomenology, involves the researcher to make interpretation of the lived experiences meanings through his/her own lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Using transcendental phenomenology, however, will allow the researcher to examine the phenomenon in an unbiased way by his personal experiences so he can determine the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology will allow the researcher to describe this phenomenon with the use of bracketing his own experiences frequently, which will allow him to obtain a fresh perspective toward the examined phenomenon (Creswell, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing in this study will allow him to set aside biases and preconceived thoughts that may impact the data collections and interpretation of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This design was appropriate for this study because it identified commonalities from data collection methods to determine common student experiences of professor communication while taking online classes. This design was selected because these

commonalities can open further research possibilities, as well as assist in enhancing professors' communication efforts in their online courses.

Research Questions

CRQ: How do online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment?

SQ1: How do online students describe online social presence connecting professor and student in an online course?

SQ2: How do online students describe experiences with a professor's online social presence and its effects on overall course performance?

SQ3: How do online students describe communicative techniques a professor should utilize to assist students throughout the term?

Setting

The setting for this study was a large, urban community college in North Carolina. To ensure confidentiality, the college was referred to as (pseudonym) Online Community College of America (OCCA) throughout this dissertation. OCCA has three main campuses across two counties: South campus, North campus, and Main campus. OCCA was selected for this study because it currently offers multiple associate degree programs with a high student population enrolled in online coursework. During the 2019-2020 school year, OCCA had over 11,000 students enrolled in a two-year degree, and over 70% of these students were enrolled in at least one online course. Of these 7,000 students, 4,000 had already completed at least one semester of online learning at the community college from previous semesters.

At OCCA, students can attend classes in the online environment if they meet the prerequisite requirements. The college offers online technical support assistance for students

taking hybrid (meeting class in seat and online, collectively) and online-only courses. Most of these students lived within the same geographical region as of at least one of the three colleges' campuses, which will allow the me to conduct interviews and focus groups through face-to-face interactions, opposed to from a distance.

OCCA offers programs for diplomas, certificates, and associate degrees, and has students who are enrolled in high school, continuing education, and curriculum programs. OCCA has a strong online existence in Nursing, University Transfer, and School of Vocational Technology. Each one of these has a dean who monitors daily operations of his/her respective area and reports to the Vice President of Instruction. The college president oversees the faculty, staff, and executive leaders.

Participants

For this study, potential participants were identified and recruited to participate in the study through general education department chairs who agreed to participate in the study. Once obtaining site's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, I emailed and called the Office of Institutional Research department's IRB chairperson and explained the study and the need for participants who have successfully completed at least one online course at the college, was in good academic standing, and was at least 18 years of age. I asked the chair to contact via email any qualifying students to see if they would agree to participate in the study. When the chair agreed, she contacted potential student participants via email. For this study, 13 participants were selected, and the students' eligibility will be verified again by the college's IRB, who compiled a list of possible participants. During the recruitment stage for this study, I considered some participants may decide to be dismissed from the study, so a secondary group of students were on call to meet the 12 to 15-participant requirement from Liberty University.

I categorized possible participants alphabetically by last name. Selection was volunteer-based, and snowball sampling was used. I contacted current students with general questions, and in the end, I asked if they would want to be part of a study on professor communication efforts and improvement in the online classroom. If a participant knew someone else who could relate, I was open to use him/her if the criteria is met. In addition, I asked the administration to send out an email invitation to all students who have attended at least one completed semester of college-level online coursework. I used a purposeful homogeneous sample, which allowed information-rich cases to be selected (Creswell, 2018; Patton, 2015). This helped me arrive at a group of participants who were identified as college students with at least one complete semester (regardless of course grade) of online course work. As previously stated, these students have experienced multiple communication efforts from the online professor(s) (Brooks & Young, 2016; Ringer et al., 2015). This sampling allowed for the establishment of a group of participants who have like experiences and backgrounds relating to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015).

Procedures

The first steps in this study were to obtain site approval from OCCA for the study and then to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Liberty University. Once IRB approval was received for the study from OCCA and Liberty University, volunteers were sought out from a sample of students at least 18 years old who meet the requirement of previously attending at least one completed semester of college-level online coursework. I asked the IRB chair to email the Liberty University-stamped consent form to qualifying potential candidates. Once interested students were identified, each one was asked if they had peers meeting the same criteria who would be interested. This snowball sampling assisted in the multi-stage to reduce bias during the selection process, which increased the study's validity (Patton, 2015).

After potential participants were identified, I obtained these participants' names, phone numbers, and email addresses. I had each email or mail me a signed copy of the consent form. This consent form clearly stated the participants can voluntarily withdraw from the study without any repercussions at any time. I sent emails with instructions and information about the one-on-one interview within the first two weeks of the term/semester and sent information about written journals for the study. Each interview was conducted on campus in an empty classroom confirmed by a department chair. Each participant was sent another email during the final six weeks of the semester with a request to attend an on-campus focus group, which allowed each to share experiences in an appropriate and comfortable setting. I recorded these interviews and focus groups with two audio recorders for future analysis. To ensure privacy, I used pseudonyms for all participant names and the community college during the research study to uphold the confidentiality of the participants.

Participants were asked to keep a personal journal with writings about their experiences with professor communication and email me their entries at the end of the semester. I asked participants to label each document with the time, location, and date per comment when they emailed me from their college email account, and it asked each participant that he/she answer as many prompts as possible for each entry. I requested each participant to include any document which may highlight how they reflected on their experiences during the study. I used interview recordings to review individual stories about experiences, focus group recordings to review collaborative experiences from a deepening discussion while I was merely the moderator, and participants' journals to reveal commonalities, trends, and themes, all in which provided experiences of professor communication to understand commonalities and assist students and professors in their futures. Member checking was used by having the participants review their

transcribed statements for meaning and accuracy. I also journaled to keep myself outside the participant content so established me to be a complete observer. Finally, I synthesized all information to determine the essence of the phenomenon by determining what “condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

I used epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis for data analysis. Epoche is the process of the researcher putting aside bias, preconceived notations, and beliefs to see the phenomenon through an original, new lens. I omitted my opinions on the topic and bracket them from the study. Phenomenological reduction was next and included bracketing the research questions, so they were unbiased and receptive to participants’ perceptions and experiences, including textural language about what was seen and experienced (Moustakas, 1994). This was repeated from different perspectives until themes surfaced. Imaginative variation was then used to find possible experience meanings that included changing how experiences were evaluated, such as using polarity and reversals to view experiences from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I synthesized information to find the essence of the phenomenon by determining the “condition or quality without which a thing would not be what it is” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

The Researcher's Role

As the researcher, it was vitally important to be responsive and attentive to participants’ needs during the study. During this study, I was employed as an adjunct professor at OCCA and will have worked with online students in previous semesters. However, if any student was a previous or current student of mine, he/she was not be eligible for this study. Provided that I teach online at OCCA, in the English and communication departments, and some qualified students in the study may have shared some interaction during at least one semester, I paid close

attention to the names of prospective participants who expressed interest in the study to ensure I do not recognize names or know them personally before sending out and requesting completed consent forms. If students were recognized, students were removed from the list due to familiarity with each of them. Before conducting interviews, I assured I did not have any previous relationships with any of the participants. For minimizing bias, I did not base views of the research on past communication experiences with students, so I bracketed my biases while obtaining and interpreting participant responses. Every researcher should use a technique such as bracketing throughout his/her research to set aside his/her experiences, biases, and preconceived notions about the research topic, as well as previous research findings and theories about the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To bracket, I started with dialogue and wrote down any personal biases, experiences, and past knowledge. Next, I took memos and wrote in a bracketing journal during the research study. When I sensed a bias or preconceived notion had surfaced, I took note of it, monitored it, and had it on record. Finally, during the final report, I wrote down all information that was bracketed. This allowed the audience to be aware of my biases as they read the results and interpretations of the data (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gearing, 2004; Giorgi, 2009).

I did have assumptions regarding what works and what does not work regarding professor communication with online students. As an English and communication professor, I have noticed increased scores and better performance of students when I started increasing communication efforts years ago. Previous students stated they were encouraged by communication and positive words during difficult times. This phenomenological study helped explore the experiences from whom professor communication in online instruction had impacted their educational journey.

Data Collection

For a phenomenological study, traditional data collection includes individual interviews, and a focus group, and written journals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I incorporated these three methods to gather rich information from multiple sources. I used a transcendental phenomenological design to obtain data about participant experiences while gathering different perspectives of the studied phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Data triangulation involved the use of multiple data collection methods, which enhanced the trustworthiness and validity of my study by cross verifying data from several sources (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I approached each data source with unbiased perspectives during the search for themes that emerge from the data. I also compared and synthesized data from each of the three sources and considered themes/commonalities from more than one collection method to be most stable.

Interviews

Conducting interviews in a phenomenological study is an effective way to obtain data from participants, as it requires an exchange of words that provides researchers a natural way of gathering perspectives of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Griffiee, 2005). Participants were able to choose which campus to meet for face-to-face interviews. Each participant was interviewed once with open-ended questions. All participants were asked the same questions. Follow-up questions were used as a guide only, as I asked questions based on previous answers to understand meaning, but most importantly to ensure each participant's unique story emerged through its telling. Semi-structured interviews were used to allow flexibility to gather the fullest, richest possible responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010).

Researchers may choose to follow participants' cues during interviews to obtain a rich and thorough description of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). During the study, all research

questions were predetermined, but I followed participant cues to enrich the data collection about experiences that would not be captured by a set of predetermined interview questions. I used an audio recorder during interviews to transcribe the audio recordings. The completed interview questions are in Appendix A.

Central research question interview questions. These questions addressed how online students described communication experiences in an online college learning environment.

1. Tell me a little about yourself: your family, your job, and your personal interests.
2. Describe your personal experiences being an online, community college student who is taking another online course. (CRQ)
3. Describe your experience as a student taking online courses. (CRQ)
4. What are some things you could have done differently while taking online courses?
(CRQ)
5. What are the most important actions that you believe you can take to be more successful as a student? (CRQ)
16. Finally, what other information would be important for me to know about your views and experiences in professor communication? (CRQ)

Sub-Question One interview questions. These questions addressed how online students described communication experiences in an online college learning environment.

6. Describe the term “social presence.” (SQ1)
7. How do you value a social presence from student to professor in online course work?
(SQ1)
8. Describe experiences with a professor’s online social presence. (SQ1)
9. How, if at all, did a social presence established a connection between student and

professor? (SQ1)

Sub-Question Two interview questions. These questions addressed how online students described experiences with a professor's online social presence and its effects on overall course performance?

10. What are the primary reasons that led you to take online courses? (SQ2)

Prompts include:

- Internal factors
- External factors
- Specific events

11. Describe the effects a professor's online social presence had on your overall course performance. (SQ2)

12. What effects does a professor's online social presence have on your educational experience each term? (SQ2)

Sub-Question Three interview questions. These questions addressed how online students described communicative techniques a professor should utilize to assist students throughout the term.

13. Describe what communicative techniques from your professor you believe can assist in helping you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (SQ3)

14. Describe communicative techniques a professor has used that did not assist you in help you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (SQ3)

15. Describe what communicative techniques from a professor you believe do not assist in helping a student become successful. (SQ3)

The initial interview question allowed the participants the chance to provide background

information. Interview questions two through five helped gather information from participants about their communication experiences in college online courses. Research shows communication is important in education (Vygotsky, 1980), but also that students and professors should communicate frequently to enhance the experience of both parties (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013). This question was designed to build upon the current literature by creating an understanding of the experiences of online college course communication.

Interview questions six through nine gathered feedback pertaining to, in general, how social presence connects the professor and student. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) suggested social presence was to be known as the communicator's awareness of the presence of a communication partner, and this was one of the most important traits an online professor should possess (Adnan, 2018). It has been found that a professor initiating a social presence online to be most important (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). These questions provided insight into online social presence that connected the professor and student in an online setting.

Interview questions 10 through 12 gathered feedback about professor social presence and its effects on course performance. Research showed social presence as extremely important, as online students view professor communication as most essential (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). Successful students realized a social presence should never end, no matter the final grade outcome of the course (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015). These questions were formulated to focus on the course outcomes and their correlation with a

professor's social presence.

Interview questions 13 through 15 gathered feedback on what communicative techniques professors should and should not use to assist students. From previous research, email was the most popular means of communication for professors to use; however, they had to make sure they replied in a timely manner to avoid a negative impact on student achievement (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). Further, as written communication was deemed more valuable than telephone conversation (Belair, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012), using social media, phone calls, and text messages as a collaborative communication effort has shown to positively impact students the most (Cakiroglu & Erdemir, 2019; Hew, 2015). These questions assisted in providing information about what the participants, from their experiences, found to be the most helpful communicative techniques professors should use. The final research question was a catch-all question for the participant to share any other notable experiences pertinent to the study.

Focus Groups

Focus group interviews usually consist of a small group of participants with similar backgrounds (Patton, 2015). These focus groups typically last between one and two hours and can provide a variety of perspectives from participants that can be used to establish themes and patterns (Patton, 2015). With the possibility that not all participants may not be able to attend, I required at least three participants in attendance and conducted more than one focus group to adhere to the participants' schedules. Setting up more than one focus group allowed for more participation (Patton, 2015). These focus groups allowed participants to collaborate without me being viewed as a professor (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). This was held at the main campus of OCCA in an open classroom approved by a department chair. It consisted of 11 questions

(Appendix B) that allowed me to gain a strong description of the phenomenon, and these questions helped gather information to address the four research questions and seek emerging themes from answers.

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your academic backgrounds.

(CRQ)

2. In general, when deciding to enroll in online courses, what was it about online education that was intriguing? (CRQ)

3. What has been the greatest communication technique that each of you experienced while attending college online? (SQ1)

4. What was the primary reason you chose to take classes online? (CRQ)

5. What is the greatest pleasure that each of you have from taking online courses?

(CRQ & SQ1)

6. After previously taking an online course, looking back, is there anything you would have done differently (Life choices, class scheduling, communication, time management, or any other significant events)? (SQ1-3)

7. When taking online courses, how does a social presence affect a student's success rate, in your experiences? (SQ2-3)

8. How are courses that are offered primarily in an online format better or worse than being in a seated classroom (technology, lack of live support, or any other major concerns)? Explain. (CRQ & SQ1-3)

9. What are the most important actions a professor can take to assist you in becoming more successful as an online student? (CRQ & SQ1-3)

10. What is required to help each of you become a successful student who will meet your academic goals? (SQ2-3)

11. Do you believe you will be able to meet your personal academic goals if the communication received from your professors stays consistent? Please elaborate. (SQ1-3)

When there are a lot of questions guiding a focus group, the researcher can become overly absorbed with asking every question, and probing participants' reasons for their responses can be neglected (Stewart et al., 2007). The 11 questions in this focus group were provided to give participants adequate time to converse with one another after individual responses (Stewart et al., 2007). Question one was an ice-breaker style of question that allowed the participants to share information about themselves and get to know one another. It was designed to provide a comfort level for the group and to show they were all college students who had similar and different academic backgrounds. The remainder of the focus group questions were created to encourage discussion and enhance interaction among the participants (Stewart et al., 2007).

Journals

Document analysis is a fundamental tool for data gathering in qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, participants were asked to create personal journals each week throughout the study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Each participant was asked to respond to six researcher-created journal prompts, which will provide the participants an emotionally safe place to divulge their stories and express their thoughts without being required to discuss their experiences verbally. They used journaling to respond about professor communication, and each document was labeled with date, time, and location of each comment. It was asked they answer

as many as they can for each entry. These were emailed to me the final week of the semester.

The completed journal prompts are in Appendix B.

1. What were some communication experiences in your online class this week? (CRQ)
2. Describe if and how your professor's online social presence connected with you this week. (SQ1)
3. Describe how you feel your professor's online social presence this week impacted your course performance and assignment grades. (SQ2)
4. What communication techniques did your professor use this week that were effective? What techniques were not effective? (SQ3)
5. What communication techniques should your professor have used to better assist you this week? (SQ3)
6. What do you wish others would have told you before taking online courses? (CRQ)

Question one helped gather information from participants about communication experiences during each week in online college courses. Communication is vital in education (Vygotsky, 1980), and there should be frequent communication from professors to enhance the experience for themselves and students (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013). This prompt was designed to add to the current literature by establishing an understanding of communication experiences in online college courses.

Question two gathered feedback to determine if the professor's social presence connected with the participant. Social presence is one of the most vital traits an online professor should possess and use (Adnan, 2018). Professors initiating an online social presence has been found to be most important in online courses (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). This

question provided insight into the connection online social presence creates between the professor and students in online courses.

Question three gathered feedback about the effects of professor social presence on course performance. Literature showed social presence is essential in online college courses, as online students view professor communication as most important (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; McBain et al., 2016; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017). Successful students know an online social presence should never end, regardless of the final course grade (Hawkins et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2015). This question was created to determine the correlation between course outcomes and online professor social presence.

Questions four and five sought to gather feedback on communication techniques online college professors should and should not use to assist students. As email is the most popular method of communication used by professors when contacting students, they must ensure replies are sent in a timely manner to avoid negative results in student achievement (Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). While students prefer written communication over conversation via phone (Belair, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012), using a collaboration of social media, text messages, and phone calls have the strongest impact on students (Cakiroglu & Erdemir, 2019; Hew, 2015). These questions aided in getting information about what participants deemed as effective communicative techniques online professors should use. Question six was a general prompt to allow participants to share possible impacts from their experiences pertinent to the study.

The focus of these written documents was for the participants to journal their experiences of professor communication and document their real-time thoughts, issues, opinions, and

experiences. These experiences were unguided in order to analyze authentic events and the views of the participants. I analyzed these personal records during the final week of the study and only focussed on information directly related to the phenomenon under examination.

These types of documents provided researchers with information that was not observable (Patton, 2015). The research project required participants to create a journal entry written at least once each week during the study. They addressed any personal experiences that related to the topics of professor communication, community college, and online learning. Writings should not have exceed 200 words and were emailed using the students' college email accounts during the final week of the semester. Each journal entry was labeled with date, time, and location of each comment. I reviewed all journal writings and searched for themes. I organized these themes and data according to the research questions. I analyzed these documents and correlated how participants reflected on communication experiences (CRQ), described online presence connecting the participant and professor (SQ1), described experiences with the participant's experiences of his/her professor's online social presence (SQ2), and described communicative techniques his/her professor should utilize to assist him/her during the term of the study (SQ3). The goal was to gather as much information to address the central research question and three research sub-questions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study involved organizing and analyzing data associated with participants' online professor communication in the study. These experiences were identified and then used to create written textual and structural description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The goal of this study's data analysis was to establish common themes that emerged from interviews, focus groups, and journal documents. All interview and

focus group transcriptions and journal responses to writing prompts were entered into the *NVivo* software program to assist in theme identification. I used Moustakas's (1994) methods for transcendental phenomenology data analysis: Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis of Meanings. This data analysis involved examining significant themes and statements that reflected commonalities among all lived participant experiences in a simplified way (Moustakas, 1994). All information were filed and stored in a password-protected computer in a locked office.

The steps supported by Moustakas (1994) were used to analyze collected data during this study. Moustakas believed in four core processes from which knowledge originated. Epoche was the first of these four processes and means "to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things" (p. 84). Being open minded was required to analyze data derived from themes and the essences from participants' experiences. I had to set aside predilections, prejudices, and predispositions and allow things, events, and people to enter anew into consciousness (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). This use of bracketing oneself away from the experience was vital to permitting researchers to suspend preconceived ideas from their own experiences with the phenomenon and allowed a new perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was vital at this stage that I bracketed myself through journaling to remove any bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transcendental Phenomenological Reduction was the second of four core processes supported by Moustakas (1994) and is described as going "beyond the everyday to the pure ego in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (p. 34). Moustakas believed a final description must be provided that described all aspects of the experience as if there was no exposure to the researcher. Horizontalization was utilized, which used verbatim transcripts from

each participants' interview and the focus groups, along with the journals, to study how significant they were to the research, allowing each statement connecting to the research topic to hold equal value (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction used horizontalization to create "a complete textual description of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 96), which included providing a detailed description of what was seen and understood of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). During phenomenological reduction, the data was analyzed from multiple angles and ideas until the meaning of the phenomenon and experiences were evident (Moustakas, 1994).

The third of four core processes supported by Moustakas (1994) was Imaginative Variation. This process allowed me to review the data in creative ways to determine possible meanings. This included reviewing the data from multiple perspectives, with varying lenses, that allowed elemental factors to surface. With this use of the imagination, any imaginable perspective can surface. In this step, researchers develop a description of the experience described as structural essences. These structural essences include steps that approach the experience and what comes after it. This permits me to "arrive at a textural-structural synthesis of meaning and essences of the phenomenon or experience being investigated" (p. 36).

The final of four core processes supported by Moustakas (1994) was taking the previous three core processes and synthesize them to establish the essential essence of the phenomenon. I reviewed all transcripts from interviews and focus groups, as well as journal entries. I found commonalities in responses to prompts and questions to synthesize the found meanings and essences, which combined textual and structural experiences to create a principle essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) claimed, "the most significant understandings that I have come to I have not achieved from books or from others, but initially,

at least, from my own direct perceptions, observations, and intuitions” (p. 41). Simply, transcendental phenomenology is grounded in the idea that the essence of truth is when researchers obtain the essentials of the phenomenon without allowing outside influences and biases to alter what they see and view.

Transcendental phenomenological reduction was used to capture the essences of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I accomplished this by engulfing myself in the data through the interview and focus group transcriptions and responses to written journals. I first identified relevant phrases and then combined them into similar groups. Next, I clustered these phrases to establish core themes (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). After these themes were established, I used rich, thick writing to create individual descriptions. I finally synthesized the textural (what was experienced) and structural (how it was experienced) into an expression (Yuksel & Yildirim, 2015). This assisted in reviewing the transcripts in *NVivo* for coding. Codes were then merged into meaningful themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After essential themes were identified, I interpreted the data within a larger theoretical framework and conveyed what the participants experienced and how they experienced it, as “the essence is the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (p. 79).

Trustworthiness

A vital step in connecting research to practice in education was to ensure validity. Research studies that will push the educational field forward will be accessible, useful, and trustworthy (Carnine, 1995). Credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability are the four criteria for trustworthiness establishment (Guba, 1981). Researchers should take the required steps to make sure their studies are worthy of trust, and the use of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability will strongly assist in this process (Guba,

1981). In this study, triangulation was used, as it used multiple methods or data sources to create a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Specifically, data source triangulation was used, as participants took part in individual interviews, focus groups, and journal writings to provide multiple avenues to find commonalities from prompt and question responses (Patton, 2015).

Credibility

The extent to which research findings accurately describing a participant's values and meanings is the definition of credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study involved the triangulation of data sources of the studied phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg., 2010). The participants took part in interviews and focus group(s), and they provided personal journals. I used bracketing to minimize personal experience or biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I practiced reflexivity to ensure I bracketed myself during the study. Using reflexivity, I examined my role as a researcher and my relationship to the research, which helped strengthen the study's trustworthiness (Guba, 1981). This involved the use of reflexive journaling throughout the data collection and analysis. This practice continued until the completion of my study. I journaled at least once per week to reflect on his writings and research to maximize any possibility that I would be conscious of biases or experiences that may have impacted the study (Patton, 2015).

During the study, I did not establish any personal relationships with participants outside of the research, and I attempted to suspend any biases and assumptions that were developed over 14 years of working with online students. Member checking was used, as it increased validity in the research by having participants to review statements and procedures for meaning and accuracy (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process increased the reliability of the study, as it reaffirmed the participants' responses from the interviews. Finally, I

established credibility throughout this study through triangulation of data with the use of individual interviews, focus groups, and written journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability center on consistency. It can be difficult in qualitative research to meet the dependability criterion, which refers to data stability (Guba, 1981). To aim in achieving dependability, I provided a strong, detailed rationale for repetition in a possible future study (Shenton, 2004). I used multiple methods in study to strengthen its fidelity (Guba, 1981), such as interviews, focus groups, and written journals. During the study, I ensured trustworthiness by ensuring all research was transparent to future researchers. I also created a documentation audit trail with rich description in order to allow repeating the study (Guba, 1981; Shenton, 2004). Additionally, confirmability will require a researcher to take appropriate steps to show research results emerge from data, opposed to researcher predispositions (Shenton, 2004). To establish confirmability, I used triangulation to collect data about the phenomenon, as it reduced personal bias (Shenton, 2004). I also practiced reflexivity for strong trustworthiness through bracketing (Guba, 1981). Finally, I reflected on any assumptions through journaling (Shenton, 2004)

Transferability

Transferability is known as whether or not results from the study can be transferred and applied to another research environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To maximize this transferability, rich and thick descriptions of the implemented frameworks and studied environment were used (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Shenton, 2004). To assure transferability in a phenomenological design, the research focus must remain on studying human experiences and gaining knowledge solely by perceiving data as it is, opposed to through the lens of more

complex thoughts and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). This phenomenological study was designed to increase understanding participant experiences not found in empirical literature. I specified in the final manuscript the number of organizations and participants involved in the study. Methods of data collection and amount of time data were also collected. Finally, I used thick descriptive data about phenomenon examined to assist when comparing similar studies (Guba, 1981).

Ethical Considerations

There is a high importance for all researchers to consider ethical issues that are relevant to their studies so they can establish a plan to address potential problems and issues that may arise (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I am a professor who teaches one or two classes per semester on campus, but predominately teaches online, and has assumptions about professor communication in on-site and online instruction. I used bracketing for these pre-existing notions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Obtaining IRB approval prior to this study helped me have procedures in place to minimize anticipated risks and ensure the findings were confidential. I used pseudonyms for all participant names and the community college during the research study to uphold the confidentiality of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants knew their participation in the study did not impact their course grades in any way. I used up-to-date security software with password-protected safeguarded files that contained transcripts and other documentation to meet confidentiality standards in psychological research. Three years after writing the final, completed copy of the dissertation, I will delete all documentation and data of the study. Finally, all participants in the study were required to sign a consent form that clearly stated each person could voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time by contacting and informing me of their final decision.

Summary

This chapter of the dissertation described the methodological foundations for a transcendental phenomenological study that was designed to expound students' experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. I used a triangulated approach that involved multiple data sources to increase trustworthiness. When I collected data from interviews, focus groups, and written journals, I examined documents and interview and focus group transcripts to synthesize important, rich information about participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I used horizontalization (epoche) to help with the analysis of the data. Once data was analyzed, I identified themes from focus groups and interviews and cluster into common themes (Moustakas, 1994). I also bracketed myself through the process of analyzing data to insist emerging themes provided a description that represented the phenomenon, opposed to my own opinions and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used *NVivo* to track significant statements and assisted in data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). It was used to validate data. From found statements, I composed a written description to present the phenomenon essence. I took all required steps to minimize ethical risks and assured each research participant's information was confidential.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This chapter contains the results from the data analysis. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The data was collected from participants' individual interviews, focus groups, and written journals. This chapter provides a brief description of each participant. The four themes that emerged from the data analysis are discussed. The themes include: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. Rich descriptions from the participants' data are included. Following the themes, the central research question and three sub questions are answered using collected data. Finally, to conclude the chapter, a summary is provided.

Participants

After obtaining IRB approval (see Appendices A & C), participants were secured. Participants included 13 Online Community College of America students enrolled in an online course. After receiving IRB approval from the site and Liberty University, the IRB chair at the site emailed all qualifying students (those who were at least 18 years old, had already completed one online course, were currently enrolled in an online course, and were in good academic standing at the college) with the stamped consent form (see Appendix B) to invite them to be part of this study. All 13 participants emailed and stated they wanted to be part of the study, and then I scheduled the one-on-one interview with each on campus. Before the interview, the participants signed the consent form. After the interview was completed, I went over the instructions for the journal writings. After the final interview, all participants were invited to

take part of one of four focus group meetings, and three focus groups were completed, consisting of two, four, and six participants. Participants emailed me the journal writings during the final week of the semester. There were 10 female participants and three male participants, ranging 18 to 52 years of age. Nine of the participants were full-time students. Ten of the participants were fully online students, while the other three took a mixture of fully online and on-campus classes. Two participants had already earned one college degree prior to participating in this study. Participant information was obscured, and a pseudonym was provided for anonymity. All participants completed individual interviews and written journals. Twelve of the participants took place in the focus group. This information is in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Contributions by Data Collection Methods

Pseudonym	Interview	Written Journals	Focus Group
Ann	x	x	x
Brad	x	x	x
Cathy		x	x
Dawn	x	x	x
Ester	x	x	x
Felicia	x	x	x
Graham	x	x	x
Hank	x	x	x
Izzy	x	x	x
Jamie	x	x	x
Kate	x	x	x
Laura	x	x	x
Megan	x	x	x

Ann

Ann is a Caucasian female who is 21 years old. She is pursuing an associate's degree in medical assisting at a local community college. She has been an online student at this community college for three years, and she plans to graduate in May 2021 before attempting to obtain employment as a certified nursing assistant.

Ann stated it is vitally important to establish a connection with online professors to “create a communication rapport with them” (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020). She recalled a time when an online professor, with whom a rapport was not established, would rarely reply to emails within 48 hours, but a professor in another class, with whom a rapport was established early in the term, would reply to communication efforts quickly and even through different modes. Ann stated:

I knew we had a quiz approaching, so I emailed with some questions for clarification.

After two and a half days, the professor never returned my email, so I replied again. Two days later, after I failed the quiz, he finally emailed me back. (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

However, when emailing the professor with established rapport, she stated, “He would email me back right away, sometimes even texting me or calling me with extra information to assist” (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Ann explained online learning was important to her because it affords her the opportunity to digest information at her own time, opposed to having to digest it right away in a physical on-campus classroom. Ann recalled a time when this occurred. Ann stated, “All this information was put on the board and said aloud, and I was writing it down as quickly as I could, but nothing was sticking in my brain. I could not digest it before he moved on” (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020). Being able to comprehend course material at her own pace, Ann has excelled in online courses the last three years, earning all As and Bs. Ann claimed, “Online education saved me. It showed me I was not dumb, but I needed more time to understand the information at hand” (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Brad

Brad is a Caucasian male who is 20 years old. Starting at a four-year university two hours away, he transferred a year ago to a local community college where he has been taking online classes for two semesters. In August 2020, he plans to transfer to a nearby four-year university and major in accounting and finance. He has been taking online classes for one year and hopes to graduate with a bachelor's degree in May 2022.

Brad has been taking online classes due to the flexibility it offers "in my day-to-day activities with family and volunteer work" (Brad, personal communication, January 16, 2020). Brad lives with two younger sisters who look up to him because he is earning a college degree. Brad stated, "I want to show my sisters how you can balance college and everything else going on in life. Online courses give us this avenue" (Brad, personal communication, January 16, 2020). However, Brad emphasizes the need for time management and communication while taking online courses. He believes both are needed by both the student and professor to enhance the probability of student pass rates. Brad claimed:

You have to know how to manage your time because online offers this flexibility, so you also must be determined. Professors have to do this too when it comes to grading, emailing, and discussion replying. We both need to communicate with one another. I need to reach out if I have questions, but the professor needs to do the same to answer questions, but also to remind us he/she is there if needed. (Brad, personal communication, January 16, 2020)

Cathy

Cathy is an African American female who is 28 years old. She has been taking online classes for two years at a local community college. She plans to transfer to a nearby four-year

university in August 2020 to pursue a bachelor's degree in psychology and graduate in May 2022. She then wants to earn a master's degree and work with military veterans and trauma survivors.

Cathy admitted that she has issues with PTSD after being in the military for 10 years, so taking classes online gives her the ability to earn an education while coping with her illness. Cathy stated, "When I did take classes on campus, I would get so anxious in the environment that sometimes I would not go to class. After a few times like that, my grades slipped" (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020). Transitioning to online coursework helped Cathy remain calmer while working on assignments. Cathy stated, "Being able to work on my own pace and not have the interaction with others gives me confidence that I can finish all classes with success" (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Dawn

Dawn is a Caucasian female who is 48 years old. She took an over 25-year layoff from college because she did not have a strong support group that would allow her to attend classes traditionally or online. She has been taking online classes for two semesters at a local community college where she is working towards an associate's degree in accounting, aiming to graduate in May 2021. She currently works at an accounting firm.

Dawn stated the reason she chose to take classes online was because she had the option to work on assignments at 5 a.m. or at midnight. She said having the flexibility was appealing to her since she had a full-time job and a family. Dawn stated:

You have to have an incredible amount of discipline, and you have to know what your learning style is. Are you a self learner? Can you sit there and read a book and retain the

information and understand what you're reading?" (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

Dawn claimed online learning is not for everyone, and there are times she wants to take classes on campus. Dawn stated, "The other side is knowing which classes you can do successfully online. This term, I am taking a class online that I wish was offered on campus, but there were no sections provided" (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Ester

Ester is a Caucasian female who is 28 years old. She first attended a local community college in 2010 but stopped taking classes to focus on work. After figuring out what she wanted to do with her life, she returned to community college back in 2018 where she has been taking online classes to earn an associate's degree in surgical technology. She hopes to graduate in December 2021.

Ester claimed she had to work full time to support her family, so taking online courses was the only way to earn her college education. Ester stated, "I have always wanted to earn my degree, and now that I can do it online, it gives me the motivation that I can better myself when I once did not feel I could" (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020). Ester stated the flexibility is ideal for all students wanting to work and take classes. She claimed if online education was not a possibility, she is not certain she would ever think about coming back to college to earn her degree.

Ester shared her experiences in online courses, and she stated, "The professors are the ones who really made the difference this time around when taking online classes. Their communication and willingness to help was always appreciated" (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Felicia

Felicia is a Caucasian female who is 18 years old. She has been attending a local community college for two semesters, taking all online classes while also working two part-time jobs. After completing general education requirements, she plans to attend a local four-year university and earn a bachelor's degree in education in three years.

Felicia stated she had to take classes online because she was taking 23 credit hours in one semester while working two jobs, so "online courses were kind of mandatory for me" (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Felicia claimed, "I cannot fit in any on-campus class into my schedule while working five morning and night shifts" (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Felicia shared her goal of becoming an elementary school teacher and stated her experiences of taking online classes molded her views of communication. Felicia claimed, "While taking classes online, I have been reminded how important communication truly is on all academic levels and course delivery methods" (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Felicia explained, for her, professors should communicate with their students if they want students to communicate with them. She stated communication is a two-way street, and professors need to remember they can reach out to students instead of waiting for students to reach out to them.

Graham

Graham is an African American male who is 19 years old. He has been attending a local community college for two semesters, taking a combination of online and on-campus classes to earn an associate's degree in information technology. He then plans on attending a local four-year university to earn a bachelor's degree in the same field or one closely related.

Graham describes himself as a family-first person who goes to school and works to help his siblings and parents. “I work to help pay bills, and I go to college to get a well-paying job to even more support them [family]. They have supported me all my life, and I believe in giving back” (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020). Graham stated taking online classes was ideal so he could still work and earn a paycheck. “Being on campus would take away from working, and I could not afford to take hours off each day for travel and sitting in a classroom when I can use that time at home doing my school work” (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Graham expressed challenges he faced while taking online classes, regarding some professors not providing enough feedback on assignments to assist him in understanding what he was doing incorrectly. Graham stated:

There are some professors who provide a grade with little to no feedback. I do not mind earning a B, but there are times when I am not told exactly how I lost points. I think they need to communicate this better to us. (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020)

Graham recalled a time when he emailed his professor asking about the scoring that was used. His professor provided feedback in a reply, but Graham felt if feedback was initially provided in the grade book, it would have saved everyone time. “If he would have told me what I did wrong on my paper, then I would not have had to email him and he would not have had to email me back. It was a time waster” (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Hank

Hank is a Mexican American male who is 19 years old. He has been attending a local community college for three semesters and has been taking classes online for two semesters. He

is pursuing an associate's degree in criminal justice, and he plans to graduate in May 2021. He then plans to transfer to a local four-year university to earn a bachelor's degree in criminal justice or related field.

Hank described himself as an inquisitive person and decided to take online classes two semesters prior to see the difference between online and on-campus classes. "I decided to give the online thing a try and see the differences than being in a class on campus" (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020). Once he started taking online classes, he stated he realized the benefits of online learning. Hank said:

After realizing how much extra time I had because of the flexibility of doing my school work at my convenience, I was able to get a job. Now, I have to continue my education online because I love my job, but I also love online classes. It is a win-win. (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020)

Hank expressed a concern he had about the differences between on-campus professors and those who teach online. "It is a plus to see your professors in the classroom and ask questions because sometimes I have to wait a while to receive an email reply" (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020). Hank elaborated by stating there have been times when a professor took days to reply to an email, and he would have "appreciated more immediacy" (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020).

Izzy

Izzy is a Caucasian female who is 30 years old. She started college back in 2008 and took classes for two years before realizing she did not know what she wanted to do with her life, so she dropped out. She returned to college prior to this study and has been taking online classes at a local community college for three semesters. She is working towards an associate's degree

in occupational therapy, and then she plans to attend a local four-year university and earn a bachelor's degree in therapeutic recreation.

Izzy stated the flexibility online course work offers intrigued her to attend virtually, opposed to on campus during her first stint in college back in 2008. However, she admitted she had to strengthen her time management and communication skills to do well in her online course work. "I learned early on that online courses are great, but I have to manage my time well and communicate with my professors" (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Izzy shared that she has experienced a variety of communication efforts from professors while taking online courses. Izzy stated:

I had a professor who was really good at communicating with all of us, checking in throughout the week and reminding us he was there for us. There were others who communicated like he did, but maybe not as much. Still they were good. However, I did have a couple professors who never communicated except if you asked questions or when they sent out the Monday announcement. (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020)

Although Izzy stated there were some professors who rarely communicated in class, her overall experiences were positive.

Jamie

Jamie is an African American female who is 21 years old. She has been taking online classes at a local community college for one year since taking time off after high school to work and save up for tuition. She is pursuing an associate's degree in cybercrime technology, and then she plans to attend a local university and earn a bachelor's degree in cybersecurity or related field.

Jamie admitted she decided to make her college course work her full-time job, but because she stated she was an introvert, she chose online classes. Jamie shared that she enjoys online course work, but she had to learn to stay on track each week. “I learned I have to stay on top of my assignments because the flexibility of being able to do my work any time, I can sometimes put it off and then forget about it” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Jamie admitted what she appreciated the most through her experiences taking online classes most were the communication efforts professor used. She claimed, “When our online professors reach out to us, it adds a personal touch. I always get nervous calling a professor, but when they reach out to us like that, I feel more comfortable (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Jamie claimed most of her online professor communication experiences have been positive, but there were occasions when it could have been better. Jamie stated, “It is a mixed bag, but mostly positive. In the 10 courses I have taken online, I would say eight were positive with professor communication” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Kate

Kate is a multi-racial (Dominican Republican, Spanish, and African American) female who is 29 years old. She earned an associate’s degree in 2013 and has worked as a medical assistant for seven years. To further her career, she has been taking online classes at a local community college for three semesters. She is pursuing an associate’s degree in business and seeks to graduate in May 2021.

Kate admitted she chose to take online courses because she had to work and wanted to spend as much time as she could with family. She claimed:

I decided to enroll in online classes because it was easier coping with working full time and having a family. I just thought I would have an easier schedule getting out of work at 5 p.m. and still be able to do my school work. (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020)

Kate added that it was important for her to show her daughter the importance of earning a college education. She also stated that she wanted to teach her daughter that plans change in life. She admitted, “I have worked in healthcare for seven years, but now it is time for a change. I want to move into business, and it is important for her to realize plans change in life” (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020).

Kate shared she had more positive experiences with professor communication than negative. She stated she appreciates when professors are active in discussion forums because “it gives us a sense that we are in a real classroom and they are there for us” (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020).

Laura

Laura is a Caucasian female who is 25 years old. She decided to attend college to earn a degree and provide a stable life for her four-year-old daughter. She has been taking online classes at a local community college for five semesters. She is pursuing an associate’s degree in early childhood education, and she anticipates to graduate in December 2020. She then wants to attend a local four-year university and major in the same discipline.

Laura admitted she chose online education because there were no other options since she had to stay home with her daughter. She claimed to be nervous at first, but she had a positive outlook. “I had to juggle family and online schooling, and it can be difficult at times with lots of

distractions, but I was excited to try something new and went straight in with smiles” (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020).

Laura stated she enjoys online learning because she has more freedom to work on assignments each week. “Most professors give us a weekly module, and having the time to work on it early or later in the week is very helpful” (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020). Laura shared her previous experiences with online professor communication when she stated:

I get frustrated when professors take forever to email me back. It does not happen a lot, but it seems like it happens during important times like midterms or finals. You would think that would be when they are on top of their emails. Other than that, I had some really good online professors that kept up with us. (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020).

Megan

Megan is a Caucasian female who is 55 years old. She previously earned a bachelor’s degree from a four-year state university and will be attending a local university in January 2021 to earn a doctorate degree in physical therapy. She has been taking online classes for two semesters at a local community college to satisfy prerequisite requirements for the doctorate degree.

Megan admitted she did not want to take online courses and had a negative view of them, but because of her busy work schedule, it was the only way she could go to college. Megan claimed:

I actually really did not want to take any online courses, but I had to take them because it was the only thing that would fit into my schedule. My original idea about online courses

was they would be too easy and I would not be challenged enough. I was not intrigued about being an online study, but I became one by default. (Megan, personal communication, January 25, 2020)

Megan stated she works several jobs. One is an hour away from where she lives, and she has to be there three times per week. She admitted after some time, she has enjoyed the online experience, but there were times she was frustrated. Megan stated, “There were a few times I had to find answers myself because my professors would never get back to me. One time, the professor seemed to get mad at me because it was assumed I should know the answer” (Megan, personal communication, January 25, 2020).

Although there have been mixed experiences, Megan claimed to stay positive through the online experience. “I know I do not have any other options than taking classes online, so I try to find the positives in all situations with assignments, professors, or classmates” (Megan, personal communication, January 25, 2020).

Results

I interviewed participants in person. All 13 participants chose to interview in a classroom on campus. The first interview was conducted on January 14, 2020. The final interview was conducted on February 2, 2020. The 16 interview questions (see Appendix E) were asked to all participants. If clarification was needed, follow-up questions were asked. Interviews lasted 35 to 45 minutes. Once interviews concluded, each participant was provided how to complete the written journals during the term (see Appendix G). Participants were asked use the six journal prompts provided to write about their online professor’s communication efforts during each week until the end of the semester. All participants composed weekly journals. One month after the final individual interview, all participants were invited to take part

of one of four focus group meetings. Three focus groups were completed on campus, consisting of two, four, and six participants. Three participants took part of the first focus group on April 4, 2020. Three participants took part of the second focus group on April 5, 2020, and six participants took part of a final focus group on April 7, 2020. The participants were asked 11 questions (see Appendix F).

All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded, and I transcribed each. Transcription were then sent to all participants for review (see Appendices I and J). The participants did not see the need for any corrections or additions. I first coded transcriptions by hand with differently colored pens and highlighters. This process provided me a richer connection with the participants' experiences. I was able to note commonalities and particular experiences. The qualitative software *NVivo* was also used to manage and organize the data. The transcriptions were uploaded into *NVivo*. Repeated codes and frequent words and phrases were used to uncover the themes (see Table 2). Once themes were declared, I sent this list to all participants who agreed all themes were evident and correct.

After data was collected, it was analyzed by using Moustakas' (1994) method for transcendental phenomenology. During analysis, I bracketed preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994) about professor communication in online instruction. All personal experiences were put aside. The use of bracketing was used throughout data collection and analysis with the use of memoing, which provided me the full sense of the interview and focus groups before constructing themes (Cresswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). These reflective notes used while memoing were gathered during the reading and rereading the transcriptions. Using these reflective notes, I listed participants' significant statements when describing the phenomenon experience. This is called horizontalization, and it was used until data saturation occurred

(Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Through these statements, I uncovered the underlying meaning of experiences through analysis, which is termed as phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). I searched for interpretive meaning for each statement. This is called interpretive meaning, which is when more meaningful themes get finalized. I considered endless options for the essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The larger themes were created, and Table 2 show the codes that were used to create the four themes.

Moustakas (1994) explained the essence identifies the nature of the experience and provides others the understanding of the shared phenomenon. Using the significant statements, the essence statement describes the individual experiences while expressing the phenomenon. This essence statement was shared with all participants via email on May 22, 2020:

The unique experiences (professor communication, social presence, communication techniques, etc.) of the online community college students in this study affected their academic performance, view of online education, and decisions for future online course enrollment. In an online education environment, communication from professors is not always used, creating a possible detachment from the online student that can provide a negative image and attitude to online learning. However, from the shared stories in this study, the online community college students still work diligently in their courses to take one step further to a college degree. They understand all online course communication is going to be different by professor, and if strong communication skills were always used, students could be even more successful than without it.

Brad replied, “Nailed it. That was exactly my experience.” Dawn stated, “That basically describes it. I think all online students’ experiences would say that too.” Felicia replies, “This is right on the money, and I hope this study shows professors our experiences so if changes are

needed, they happen. Thank you for letting me voice my online journey up to this point.” Jamie stated, “Perfectly stated.” Being an online student is not as easy as many people think, but it is easier when there is effective communication coming from the leader of the course.

Table 2

Themes from Codes Identified in Phenomenological Reduction

<i>Codes</i>	<i>Themes</i>
Announcements throughout the week Email reminders Active in the discussion forum Checking up on students Wants to be a presence Different communication methods Keeping in touch	Frequent communication
Being available Reliable and dependable Receptive open communication Being a continued resource Able to voice concerns Engaging with the class	Approachability
Detailed feedback Motivating emails / always motivating Message signatures No shaming Frustration about success Positive presence and feedback Makes me want to try harder Keeps me stay on track Checking on students Keeping in touch	Professor Encouragement
Weekly online meetings Video lectures Virtual meetings Recordings Collaboration Instruction clarity Treat online like traditional face-to-face classes Immediacy	Live lecture interaction

Video conferencing

Theme Development

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. Data analysis was theoretically grounded in Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, as it explores teaching adults how to learn, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory, which recognizes the degree to which a person is seen as a "real person" and focuses on how social effects are caused by the amount of social presence received by others. Four themes emerged from immersion of data and coding: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction.

Theme 1: Frequent communication. The first theme that emerged during data analysis was that all 13 participants expressed they need frequent communication during the week from their online professors. This theme addressed the central research question and the third sub-question of how online community college students describe their experiences with professor communication and communication techniques. When participants were directly asked about their experiences with communication received by online professors, some stated it was not enough, while others stated there were great amounts. However, one common trend was strong communication efforts in high quantity was never viewed negatively.

Ann described her online course experiences with professors as very positive. She has been taking online courses to balance her work and family obligations and stated her professors' amount of communication assisted her in being successful. Ann stated:

I have been very lucky to have online professors who do a lot for us. They are sending out announcements, checking in on us during the week, leaving what I think is good feedback in the grade book, and getting back to me quickly when I have questions. All the ways they are communicating with us really makes it more personable in a way, and I think that really helped me do better in class, better than I thought I would do. (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

Brad recalled a time in his online course when his professor used the weekly discussion forums to frequently communicate with students. “He replied to everyone’s posting and asked questions in the replies. Most of us would answer his questions, and he would ask another. It kept the conversation going throughout the week” (Brad, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Cathy shared her experiences with professor communication when she took an online science course that came with a virtual laboratory requirement.

I think we were all a little nervous about how to do a lab online, or at least I was.

However, the professor would keep in constant contact with us and had a strong hands-on feel, just like if we were on campus with her. She would frequently send us direct messages to see if we had questions, and I do not know if I would have made it without that. (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

Dawn recalled a semester when she was taking online courses and had a professor who minimally communicated with her and her classmates.

She would send out weekly announcements and give us good feedback on graded assignments, but that was it. If I emailed her, it would take about a day or two to get a reply. I would not say it was a bad experience, but it was not a great one. I think more

communication would have added a more classroom feel to our experiences (Dawn, April 5, 2020).

Dawn shared she did very well in the class, but there were classmates of hers who struggled. “I had one classmate blatantly asked me for help in a discussion posting because reaching out to the professor was a waste of time” (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Dawn claimed if her professor used more frequent communication, more students in class would have felt more comfortable and maybe would have done better on their overall course grades.

Like Dawn, Ester described her experience with online professor communication when “more was needed” (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020). Ester was taking an online math and composition course during the same semester. She shared her math professor rarely communicated with her and other students besides weekly announcements. “This professor would post an announcement on Monday and that was it. Even in the grade book, there was just a grade. If we answered something wrong, the correct formula was provided, no individualized feedback at all” (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020). Ester stated she realized this was not the norm when comparing this professor’s communication style with how her composition professor communicated with the class.

It was night and day difference. My writing class professor left great feedback on our papers and in the comments area. There were frequent check ins during the week, and he even provided us video recordings where he went over step-by-step how to do the papers. That is what we needed in math. I mean, that [math] is a class that is hard enough itself, but when it is online, it is even harder without the proper help. (Ester, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Felicia mentioned she was part of a group project in an online course and her professor was instrumental in her group's success.

I mean, face it. Nobody really likes group projects, or at least most do not. However, my psychology professor was always there with us along the way. He created a discussion forum for each group, as well as an email chain. He checked in with us daily, to point where one of our group members sent me a text asking why he was always in our business. I told her it was because he wanted us to do well, and she never questioned it again. (Felicia, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Felicia stated if it was not for the professor's frequent communication efforts, she did not believe they would have succeeded as much as they did. She attributes the group's hard work and drive to the constant reminder their professor was there for them.

Graham stated he learned the value of professor communication from experiences term by term. Graham claimed he never had a professor who did not communicate, but "I learned what previous teachers could have done when comparing to current professors, especially when it comes to communicating and being there for us" (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020). He stated he learns new professor communication techniques each term, all of which he appreciates, but it showed him, who wants to one day teach Information Technology online, the best ways to engage and communicate with students.

Hank shared his experience with an online professor who not only rarely communicated with his class but also communicated so infrequently that it was an instrumental reason for Hank to withdraw from the course. Hank stated, "I needed guidance. I needed direction during a hard time. I should have reached out, but I did not. He never reached out to us except to post the week's work" (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Since his professor had limited

communication, Hank claimed he did not see the importance of reaching out when he needed assistance. However, looking back at his decisions, “I know now that was the dumbest decision to not reach out and call or email him. I lived and learned, but I still hope I never have a professor like that again. Communication to just poor” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Izzy shared an experience with her online professor’s communication after a death in her family. She stated she was having difficulties keeping her mind on track of assignments, but her professor set up a communication plan to assist her.

My professor was my saving grace. I told her about our loss, and she asked if I wanted to take time away from school. I told her no, but it was difficult to focus. She went out of her way to create a special plan just for me to stay on top of my work, but what I appreciated the most was we set up a schedule to talk on the phone Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. That continuous contact with her really helped me stay on track, some because I knew I would have to report updates on what I had done since the last time we talked, but also because I felt I owed it to her for helping me so much and staying in constant contact with me. (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020)

Due to the continuous communication from her online professor, Izzy admitted it was appreciated. She does not expect all professors to go out of their way for online students like her professor did, “but others professor can sure learn a thing or two about from her about continuous communication” (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Jamie shared her experience of having an online professor who lacked in communication frequency. Jamie was taking an online philosophy course a year before the interview and focus

group was conducted, and she stated her professor never communicated with the class, outside of start-of-the week announcements and returned emails, which took at least one day for a reply. Jamie realized this was not the norm when comparing to concurrent online courses she was taking.

I knew something was off with this professor and his communication. At first, I did not notice because the start of any term is full of reading and the normal start-of-the-semester jitters, but as things slowed down, and I was able to compare it [communication] to other professors and courses, I realized he just was not there with us. You know, there is a difference between being there for us and with us. My other professors felt as if they were with us while he barely made us, well me, feel like he was there for us. (Jamie, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Jamie's experiences proved that communication frequency from professors can show students their professors are there alongside them during their academic paths. Jamie admitted her professor being there for her and her classmates was not enough as being there with them.

Like Jamie, Megan shared an experience with professors being there "for" the students instead of "with" them in online courses. She was taking online courses due to limited options in scheduling, so Megan admitted she was already skeptical of online learning. She stated, "I had to take online classes because there were no other options" (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020). In an online sociology course, Megan stated she had a professor who had limited communication with students. She recalled:

This professor rarely contacted any of us, and we barely heard from her. I know this because we had group work that split half the class, and I guess being an older student, they [students] confided in me about how they wish the professor was more interactive.

The ironic thing is this was a sociology class and she was not social at all. I did not think much about it at first because I was still upset that I had to take online classes, but once my group members brought it to my attention, it was like, “Oh yea. She really isn’t there for us.” It was kind of like we were left to fend for ourselves with the little bit of information she provided us each week. (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Megan admitted once the frustration of having to take online courses subsided, she was able to understand how infrequent her sociology professor was communicating with the class. She claimed, “Not only did my classmates tell me about the poor communication, but I was able to see it compared to my other online courses where I think my professors did an excellent job” (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Laura described her experience with a professor who showed her how valuable frequent communication can be for online students. As an early childhood education major, Laura took an online Foundations of Education course that opened her eyes to teaching philosophies, but also a skill not taught in the coursework: professor communication importance. She claimed:

I have taken many education courses, and usually the focus was on theories, standards, and curriculum, but in this online course, my professor’s communication really made me realize how valuable a simple everyday trait, that we honestly should have, truly is. The postings to our announcements area, emails sent, and forum replies our professor used each week made the online class just as engaging as being in an actual classroom on campus. It made me excited to log into Moodle each week to see what new things he posted for us. On top of that, he always told us he could be reached through email or phone. He always made a joke that his phone was attached to the hip, so never hesitate to call or text. I love that in a professor! (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020)

Laura admitted her experience with frequent professor communication provided a template on how all online courses should be taught. She claimed, “There is no reason for online professors to communicate any less than how he did. Looking back, there probably was not a ton of extra effort on his part, but it made the world of difference to me and I would assume my classmates too” (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020).

Kate shared her experience with professor communication as an appreciated frequent contribution. Kate took online classes because she was balancing work, a family, and trying to earn a degree. The experiences of professor communication, according to Kate, truly impacted her view of online education moving forward.

I was blessed with many professors who would post announcements, email us back quickly, stay involved with group assignments, reply to discussions, and just be there for us during the term. There were some professors who were not as much on the communication spectrum, but overall, many did a great job. (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020)

Kate stated it was the communication frequency that professors had during the semester that “led me to know I could always reach out, and that was important to me. Much love to those who are there for us. You know what I mean?” (Kate, personal communication April 4, 2020).

Theme 2: Approachability. The second theme that emerged during data analysis was that all participants shared the need for their professors to be more approachable when students needed them for questions and issues. This theme addressed the central research question and the first sub-question of how online community college students describe their communication experiences and social presence connecting professor and student in online courses. The participants shared their experiences with online course social presence and the connection of all

stakeholders. With each attempt at social presence or lack thereof from online professors, participants were impacted.

Izzy stated that her experiences with online professors were mostly positive, but what she appreciated the most was when she knew she could contact her professors at any point and rely on them helping her. She believed all professors should be approachable when teaching online courses. She stated:

There was one class in particular that was taught by what I think is the best online professor ever. She made our online class seem like the word online meant nothing. She was always there for us, and we knew it. I had professors before that said we can reach out for anything, but then there was not much communication at all. This professor, she really meant it when she said we can contact her at any time. It was her words, demeanor, and I guess her style that let me know I could always let her know if I needed anything. That meant the world to me, more than she knew, and all online professors need to have this presence about them. (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020)

Laura revealed she appreciated when her professors would be open to communication and welcomed questions or comments. Laura was taking online courses while working and raising her young daughter, so when juggling different obligations, she admitted, “I had a lot of questions about assignments and how to do many of them because I wanted to do them right” (Laura, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Being approachable was an important characteristic she shared an online professor must possess. She stated:

I need to know I can reach out to professors when I have questions or need to voice concerns about grades or even classmates. Like I said, I had a lot of questions because I want to know I am doing things right. Knowing I could approach my professor in my

math class, for example, was important to me. Math is a tough class to take online, and I first wondered how receptive she would be with all my emails. After the first week, though, she told me I could call or text her any time I wanted. I remember reading that email over and over to make sure I read it right. You do not see many professors say and mean it, but she did. I loved being able to come to her with anything, and I wish everyone teaching online would be like this. (Laura, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Brad recalled an experience with an online professor that was not very approachable, showing him the importance for a professor to be welcoming and available to students. Brad took an online biology course one semester prior to this study, and his professor sent out weekly announcements and provided what Brad called “decent feedback.” In addition to this communication techniques, Brad shared:

It was a weird situation. The professor communicated with us once a week and graded our work on time, but the wording in his emails and announcements were more robotic. It made me think it was all copy and paste. When he did email me back, it would take about two days for a reply, and I do not know, maybe it was the words he used, but I remember thinking his tone was stern. It was almost like he wanted to tell us “Why are you bothering me with this?” That is just not how you should be treating your students, in my opinion. Comparing him to other online classes and professors, I rarely contacted him the second half of the semester. I just figured stuff out on my own. (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Due to tone from communication efforts of Brad’s online professor, it caused him to avoid further communication in the course. Brad claimed, “I think I could have done better if I reached

out more, but I got my B and was happy to just be done with him” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Ann took an intense eight-week online course the semester before this study, and she shared the need for her professor’s online social presence and how it connected her with the professor.

It was a very intense research methods course, one I wish I would have taken in 16 weeks instead of eight. However, the professor is what kept me, probably us all, going. She sent out frequent announcements and even sent personal emails to each of us. It was almost like a parent asking “Is everything good? All OK? Does this make sense?” I am sure some people in class probably found it annoying, but I loved it. I even needed it. It gave me the sense to tell myself, “Hey, if I need help, she will be there.” I could contact her with any questions I had, and it was like she thrived on that. You can tell she is a helper, and I loved her for it. Because of her, I got an A, but more importantly was able to understand the methods for my next course. (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

With the continuous social presence Ann’s professor showed throughout the intense short semester, Ann stated she was able to succeed because of the approachability her professor provided her and her classmates. She claimed, “she was the model of professor social presence” (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Jamie described a situation with an online professor who was teaching two different courses in which Jamie was enrolled. Like Brad, Jamie recalled her online professor communicating with students in a mundane, standoffish manner.

The professor seemed really nice at first and did a good job of communicating with us at

the start. However, after a few weeks, his emails and announcements were very, I do not know, dry, I guess. I remember thinking “I do not know about this guy now.” The negativity set in at the midterm mark when all his weekly communications were copy and paste from one class I was taking to the next. Now, I am all about saving time, but when you know you have the same students in two of your courses, because it was not only me, you would think you would try to change up your messages. One of my girlfriends in class even texted me to say he was getting lazy. It was a character change, and there was a drop off in a social presence after a few weeks. That was enough for me to just try to finish up class on my own and I did not look back. (Jamie, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Due to a change in communication efforts and social presence, Jamie admitted she did not feel her professor was approachable, and it lost a connection between her and the rest of the class. She claimed, “It is sad because the start of the semester had such promise, but he just seemed to drop the ball, and I am sure others in class suffered because of it” (Jamie, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Felicia shared her experience with taking online classes and how her professors provided a strong social presence. She claimed it was vital to her success in class because she was taking over 20 credit hours each semester while working two jobs.

My online professors were very engaging and present. Responding to discussion posts, sending out emails, and checking on us was a great personal touch. Having my professors very present each week, it gave me the satisfaction to know I can contact them when I needed them. Taking so many classes and working two jobs, I did not have a lot

of time wait around for answers because I try to get my work done early in the week.

(Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

Felicia recalled one occasion when she needed to contact her professors during an emergency.

She stated:

We had a family emergency, and I had to go out of town for a few days. I did not have my work completed for the week in my speech class, but my going out of town would not have me back in time to meet the Sunday deadline. I at first got that “Oh crap” thought in my head, but I then relaxed when I realized I could contact my professor and explain the situation, and there was a good chance he would work with me. (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

Having a professor with strong social presence, Felicia admitted she felt at ease to approach him about her situation. She stated, “It means a lot to me to have someone like him, and others, that you feel comfortable coming to when needed” (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Cathy shared her experience with online professor social presence and how it assisted her throughout a very trying semester. Cathy admitted she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is why she chose to take classes online. She explained her professor was always supporting of her and let her know if she needed anything, Cathy could reach out to her.

Cathy shared:

My professor knew of my disorder, but she never treated me different. She was there for all of us. I know because I was in a group project, and my team was telling me how surprised they were about how much the professor was there for them too. It made me feel good that I was not getting pity attention, you know? Everyone was getting her

attention, and it really helped when I needed her. I had an episode around the midterm, and I had to contact her to let her know I may be in the hospital for a few days. I never hesitated to call her. Usually, that phone gets heavy when you got a call a professor, you know? But it was not like that with her. I know she was my professor, but she was also like a friend. (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

Cathy admitted her battle with PTSD has been a struggle when it comes to taking classes, but when it comes to professors like the one she mentioned, “If they were all like her, we would all be OK. The class material was tough, but her being for us helped us all get through it. I will never forget her” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Hank shared his experience with an online professor who had minimal social presence in class and how it created a disconnect between them both.

This guy was nice. He really was, but when it came to overseeing the class, he was rarely there. It was almost like he was just teaching to collect a check. Maybe I am comparing too much to other professors, but this guy was rarely around and contacting us. I am the kind of guy who when something like that happens, I distance myself from them. I know it is not always the right thing to do, but that is how I am wired. (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Hank claimed this disconnect affected how he approached his communication with the online professor. During a stressing time in Hanks life, he claimed, “I should have contacted him about what was going on with me and my family, but I did not feel it would do any good. I withdrew from the class. I know now that was dumb, but I did” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020). If there was more of a social presence from Hank’s professor, there could have been a chance Hank would have communicated the issues he was having, and there is a possibility he

may not have withdrawn from the class, impacting Hank's financial aid and graduation timeframe plan.

Ester shared her experiences with online professor social presence and its effects on her and her choice to contact the professor when she needed him.

I had a different math professor that was always there for us. He contacted us regularly, and he always told us if we needed anything, we could reach him by phone or email. He ended each announcement and email like this, and he sent it out at least three times a week. I knew if I needed anything, I could reach out. I never had to reach out with any issues, but I remember feeling a comfort knowing I could if I needed to. (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020)

Ester commented on the approachability from her professor and stated, "I rarely get professors like that, and to know he was there for us, I wish they were all like that" (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Megan recalled a time when her professor pushed her away from trying to communicate. She claimed she reached out to her professor about a thesis statement, and instead of answering Megan's question, she said that Megan should know the answer because she had already passed the prerequisite course. Megan stated the professor then decided to post an announcement to the course that reminded students they already had the prerequisite course behind them, so they should know such things about thesis statements. Megan claimed this activity from her professor made her avoid wanting to contact her again.

Kate also shared a negative experience with professor behavior that impacted her choices to contact her professor with questions.

Email conversation was very abrupt. I know that you cannot judge tone through email, but when it [bad tone] happened all the time when I read email replies, I just shut off. I remember thinking, “I do not want to reach out to this woman anymore.” What bothered me was that I was taking other classes where professors were night and day different than her. I knew it was not me; it was her that was the issue. (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020)

Kate also stated her classmates shared her views on how inviting their professor was with her communication. “My small group project members we all like ‘Something is up with this teacher. It is like she does not want anybody to mess with her.’ I agreed 100%” (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020).

Graham shared an experience with an online professor whose action caused him to avoid contacting the professor when a grade issue was risen. Graham stated his online composition professor posted a B in the grade book for an essay final draft with very minimal feedback elaborating on the grade decision. Graham recalled:

I was not happy with the B, but I knew it could have been worse. I just wanted to know what I did wrong so I would not make the same mistakes for the upcoming papers because I knew we had at least three more to write that semester. I emailed him twice in fact because after two days of not response, I felt the second attempt was needed. His reply was as snippy as I heard it could be from others. His email reply was “Review the rubric and instructions.” That was it! No direction or anything. A few weeks later, I had a low discussion grade, and I emailed him again, another two times. I got the same response: “Review the instructions.” I was done. I no longer reached out to him for anything. (Graham, January 16, 2020)

Graham's professor showed him such a lack of approachability that he cut communication ties with the professor all together. Graham admitted, "I did not want to, but I got so tired of dreading opening his emails because I knew they would not help" (Graham, January 16, 2020).

Dawn expressed the joy she had with an online professor who was always available for her and her classmates. As Dawn works a full-time job and has a family, taking online courses is the only way she can manage all of her obligations. Professor communication was essential to help her in our academic journey, as she claimed, "My professor's communication was the driving force to help me succeed. She was always here motivating me and letting me know I could contact her with any issue or question" (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020). Dawn spoke about her professor's response time and stated, "She always replied back to my emails, phone calls, and texts, and there were a lot of them, within minutes, usually. She was always someone I could count on if I needed anything" (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020). When speaking about her professor's approachability, Dawn exclaimed, "Without a doubt I knew I could count on her. She was there for me and everyone else in class. It was comforting knowing I had someone in my corner during this semester and I could lean on her expertise if I needed anything" (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Theme 3: Professor encouragement. The third theme that emerged during data analysis was that all participants shared the benefit when their online professors were encouraging during the week. This theme addressed the central research question and the second sub-question of how online community college students describe their communication experiences and how a professor's online social presence affects students' overall course performance. The participants voiced their experiences of how communication from online professors encouraged them or how lack of professor communication provided the need for encouragement.

Ann shared her experience with an online professor's social presence and how her communication efforts were encouraging. She stated:

I go back to my research methods class. Not only was she always communicating with us and checking in, but the words she used and the way she spoke when I got a chance to chat with her on the phone were motivating. You just knew she was in our corner and knew we could get through what I thought was one of the toughest courses I ever took. One time she told me, "You can do this," and I guess it is because of the personable demeanor she had all term, but truly believed her. (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Ann also claimed this was her approach to all students, and "it seemed to motivate everyone, not just me" (Ann, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Ester described an experience about how an online humanities professor used WhatsApp to maintain a social presence with students. She stated:

I will never forget my humanities professor. He was very caring and had a wonderful teaching style. He found out there were some students in class from someone in the Caribbean, so he told us he researched to find a free direct messaging service. He used WhatsApp to save those students from paying fees if they wanted to text. I remember thinking that was the coolest move of any professor. (Ester, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Ester then explained how her professor used WhatsApp to make a special connection with her. She stated:

I had been working on a paper that I was not confident in, and sure enough, I did not do well. I think I got a D on it. However, he gave me solid feedback and showed me why

missed the points and where. I sent him WhatsApp messages with questions, and he would reply back immediately. I felt ready for the next paper, and sure enough I got an A on it. I sent him a message saying thank you. He replied back not to thank him because I earned the A. I read that and it made me smile, and then he said he was proud of me. My heart dropped, but in a good way. To know he was proud of me, it made me not want to let him down again. It was really motivating. (Ester, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Laura explained an experience with an online professor whose strong social presence impacted her course performance. She shared:

Even though the class was set up for us to work on our own pace each week, my stats professor set up weekly like 15-minute phone meetings with each of us. He would go over how we did the previous week and answered questions about what we were doing that current week. Even though he was on the phone, I could almost like hear the smile on his face if that makes sense. It was really a unique set up, and I wish other online professors did this. (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020)

During these check-up workshops, Laura admitted, “He obviously cared for me and my success in class. It was motivating, even encouraging, to know I had someone by my side to see me do well, especially me being a single mom. It meant a lot to me” (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020).

Megan admitted although she had some negative experiences with online classes and professors, there was one that stuck out in a positive way. Megan took an online science course where her professor provided a social presence by posting a recorded video session during week one. She stated:

In the video, he started with a promise and said he would remind us of this promise. He even told us to hold him to it because he would hold us to standards during the semester. I remember feeling intrigued before he even made the promise. He said if we did not earn an A or B in his class, it was our own fault. He stated he would do all he could to assist us, but he would not go more than halfway; we needed to do the other half. I was not looking forward to a science class online, but when I heard this, I thought “Let’s do this!” (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Megan stated during the semester, the professor would send out announcements throughout the week and reminded them of his promise. She also claimed, “He would mention it on the comments of my work too. He would show us what we did wrong, but what we did right, and he would write ‘Remember my promise!’ I loved that technique” (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Izzy described an experience with an online professor who maintained a strong social presence, and it benefited everyone in class. She claimed:

Nobody likes group projects, but this professor kind of changed the game with the perception. We had a group project in my communications course, and the professor created a group discussion forum for each group. We were to post daily in this forum, but he would also post daily in there. It was cool because he was acting like a group member instead of a professor. No, he was like a teammate instead of a coach. He was kind of like, “Hey you guys. You are looking good here with this section. I think this area needs some strengthening, but I know from Sally’s writing that she can tackle that. Izzy, what do you think about doing X, Y, and Z.” It was cool and motivating. I loved it! (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020)

Izzy stated she thought the encouraging tone her professor had motivated all of them to do well, but most importantly, “It was like a kid not wanting to let their parents down” (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Brad shared his experience with one online professor who used a motivational technique that he claimed was “so simple but meant the world” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020). He stated:

This professor was awesome. He ended each email to me with “High Five” or “Fist Bump.” It was so simple, but I could imagine being in class and getting a high five from him. I do not know what it is about something like that, but you smile. You feel an energy. It worked for me. (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Kate described an experience she had with an online business communication professor who maintained a strong social presence and used an interesting motivational technique. She recalled:

So this professor would post announcements early in the week and really throughout the week. One thing he did that I thought was pretty cool was he named us in the announcements. For example, I cannot remember the name, so let’s say John. He would post an announcement reminding us of a speech or project or something, and he would say that some already finished, but those who have not, please remember the deadline. He would say, “John and Susan just finished their presentation with me, and they rocked it.” (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020)

Kate stated she wanted to read her name in the next announcement, so it motivated and encouraged her to do well. She claimed, “I wanted to add that flare” (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020).

Cathy recalled a time when her interpersonal communication online professor continued to maintain a social presence with her specifically, and that helped her stay motivated and encouraged to do well in the course. She shared:

I had to move from North Carolina to Texas for a few months, and I knew during the travel that I would not have Internet, and I was not really sure when I would have it when I got down there. I called my professor and explained the situation. He was real nice. I told him I did not want to fall behind, but I was afraid of what was going to happen, you know, while I am on the road. He was cool. He thanked me for letting him know, and he put together a kind of like make-up plan for when I got to Texas and got Internet back on. He texted me each day to check in, and he even put that he knew I may be driving so reply when I can. He just wanted to check on me and to remind me we would get through the work together. (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

Cathy shared that she arrived in Texas safely, and when the Internet was turned on, she was six days behind schedule. However, with the social presence and encouragement of her professor, she claimed, “I got through it and did really good on my work. It was because of him, though” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Hank recalled an experience with an online professor whose social presence helped him stay motivated when he thought he was not doing well in class. He stated:

My professor was awesome when grading because he would do a solid job of letting me know what I did wrong, but really emphasized what I did right. He would tell me to work on this or that, but continue to this, this, and this. He would do this on every assignment, and I emailed him about it. I thanked him for the comments, and he replied saying I needed to focus on my strengths, and we could work on the other things together.

Even though I may have gotten a B, I was all about the next assignment because I knew I could do better. He was great! (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Hank claimed that he thought it was a unique technique to focus so much on strengths than weaknesses, and he believed it was this focus that helped him become stronger in all courses.

Dawn shared her experience with encouragement that stemmed from online professor social presence. Dawn stated the professor created a Student Café discussion forum so students could post anything they wanted about class or life. She recalled:

It was very nice to have this option. A lot of us used this forum to chat about things that were bothering us or worrying us about class. The professor kept a close eye on it apparently because he would reply to everyone's posting with upbeat and positive responses. He gave us this outlet, and he did not hold it against us if we had a class issue. In fact, one student posted that she did not like her grade on an assignment, and he asked her to call him the next day so they would "work it out." I do not know the result, but I thought it was really cool that he had such a personal touch to class like that. (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020)

Dawn shared that because of his monitoring and presence in the forum, he really made sure to voice so much positivity that it encouraged anyone who had issues, especially her. She stated, "He replied to one of my worries with deadlines and said he would work with me, and to call him with any questions. Because of everything he did for us at that point, I knew I could count on him" (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Graham recalled an experience with an online professor's social presence when he was scheduled to have surgery that could hinder his ability to meet deadlines. He stated:

I called and talked to my math professor about the surgery I needed but voiced my

concerns about deadlines. Her reply was very heartwarming and told me not to worry about deadlines at this point. She told me to take care of myself and we would work out a plan for what I was missing after surgery and healing. (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020)

Graham added that after his surgery, his professor contacted him every other day via email, phone call, or text to check in on him but to also personally help him with the math equations he was working on while catching up. He stated, “She was adamant about making sure I did not fall through the cracks. I did not want to let her down because nobody else did that for me that term” (Graham, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

Jamie described a positive experience with her online professor’s social presence and encouragement. She stated, “He always found the positive in everything. If I made a mistake on my paper, he would tell me he knew what I was going for, but it was this and this that was correct” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Jamie admitted that she used his positive tone and approach to her assignments because she felt the comfort in knowing he would help her. She claimed, “I knew from the first few weeks that he would focus on the positives, but I did not want to give him anything negative to review. It was a challenge to me, but I was happy for it” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Felicia explained a time when her online professor had a such a strong social presence that she was very encouraged.

I was going through some personal issues, and honestly, I almost dropped out. My writing class professor always told us we could reach out to him, and I actually did. I do not know what, but I did. I told him about the personal struggles I was going through, and I remember him asking if he could share his story with me. I do not want to go too

much into it, but he shared that he once got suspended from college because of wrong decisions. He shared his journey with me and how he bounced back. I was able to relate to his experiences, and this helped me know I could get through the personal issues I was experiencing. I know I am not giving too much personal info here, but his story really helped me. After that, he continued to keep in contact with me by email and text to check on me. He really helped me know I had someone that supported me when I did not realize I had it all along. (Felicia, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Felicia shared that she passed the course, but “if I had to do it all over again with another professor, I do not think I would have succeeded. He was the determining factor” (Felicia, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Theme 4: Live lecture interaction. The fourth theme that emerged during data analysis that all participants expressed as vital was online professor live lecture interaction. They felt this live option would have a direct reflection on their overall course success. The option to have these interactions recorded for those who could not attend could benefit everyone in class due to online classes being strictly asynchronous. This theme addressed the central research question and the third sub-question of how online community college students describe their communication experiences and communicative techniques professors should use to assist students throughout an online course.

Dawn shared her experience with professor communication techniques and stated the most helpful was the use of virtual office hours. She claimed she appreciated the ability to see her professor in live time, and “it gave a more personal touch to class” (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020). She recalled her professor never making office hour

attendance mandatory, but “I think we all wanted to show up, especially when it was close to the midterm or finals” (Dawn, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Like Dawn, Brad shared his appreciation for the office hours his online professor held during a semester. Brad stated, “It was really cool that he provided us this time. I knew I could always contact him all the time, but to know he was there for me to pop in, it was helpful” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Online professors using a live platform to assist students is what Brad views as “going above and beyond” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Asynchronous online courses provide students the opportunity to work at their own pace, but Brad recalled, “it added an important dynamic, one I wish all my professors would use” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Hank also shared his experiences with online professor office hours to assist students. He recalled, “It was great. It was just like us [students] being on campus and needing help. I could like knock on the door, come in, have a seat, and chat. That is how his office hours were set up” (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020). Hank stated he attended most weekly office hours offered, and if he missed a session, “I felt off for the week, like I let the professor down, even though he never made it a requirement to show up” (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020).

Ann wrote about her experiences with professor communication techniques she believed professors should utilize, and claimed in her journal:

I finally attended my life development professor’s online office hour this week. Wow! I wish I would have done this sooner. Week 7 was way too late to start. She went over my questions about structure, and I logged out feeling positive about putting the midterm project together. (Ann, personal communication, March 2, 2020)

Ann stated in the focus group that she appreciated the opportunity for her and her classmates to meet with their professor virtually to converse about class content. She added, “After hearing that other professors use this [office hours], I think the college should make it a requirement” (Ann, personal communication, April 4, 2020).

Jamie shared her experiences with online professor office hours in an interview. She stated she appreciated the time her health professor took out each week for the class. She claimed, “He did not have to hold these sessions, but I personal thought they were helpful. They gave me a chance to make sure I understood what we needed to be doing that week” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Jamie claimed she attended most of the office hours, but if she missed one, “I did not feel stressed because I knew I could also call or email him. He made sure we had many ways to communicate with him, but being there with him one on one was always the best” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020).

Like Jamie, Kate also shared positive experiences of live interaction with her online professors. She stated she had three professors in one semester who held online office hours via Zoom and/or Skype each week. She added that the ability to meet with them in real time was vital to her understanding course materials and doing well in class. She admitted, though, when she took classes that did not offer a live session, she was more stressed. She claimed:

Having the ability to go over things with my professor and even have him share his screen to navigate our class or review a document, it was great. I was always more at ease when I had professor who did office hours compared to those who did not. (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020)

Kate did claim she could be successful in online courses without the live meetings, but they “gave us a better chance to get that A” (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020).

Felicia shared her experiences with online professor communication techniques and appreciated a recorded live lecture format where the entire class could enter a virtual classroom and review a lecture just as if they were in a physical classroom. She recalled:

The first time, I was a bit hesitant. I had been taking online classes for a while, and nobody had ever done anything like this. I thought it was going to be like a Skype call or something, but the professor had full lecture ready to go. He went over a powerpoint just like he would on campus. We had chances to ask questions. It was really cool.

(Felicia, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Felicia added that because of her two jobs and taking over 20 credit hours during a semester, there were times when she could not attend the live sessions. She stated her professor never made it a requirement, and he recorded the lectures for those who had other obligations. She stated, “Being able to review the missed lecture when I got off work was extremely helpful. I sometimes do work at three in the morning because of my schedule, so reviewing the recording kept me up to speed” (Felicia, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Like Felicia, Izzy also shared her experiences with live lecture recording options. She claimed she attended most of the lectures and they “provided us all a real-feel sense of class that I absolutely loved” (Izzy, personal communication, April 5, 2020). Izzy stated when she attended live lectures, it was just as engaging as if she was in a physical classroom on campus. She did admit when she could not attend a live session, she appreciated the ability to review the recording. She claimed:

There were times I could not make it so when I got home, I would review it [recording] to see what I missed. I was always bummed that I could not attend, but I wrote down notes just like I would if I was there. I remember many times when I would have a

question, one of my classmates who was there live would ask it so I would get my answer right there. It was great! (Izzy, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

The ability to have live recorded lectures with online professors is something Izzy admitted, “I wish all my previous courses would have used this [live recorded lectures]” (Izzy, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Graham admitted in a focus group that he also appreciated live lectures in his online courses. He claimed:

In my foundations course, I never missed a meeting, but it also helped being able to review the recording of what I was listening to live on that Monday night. I would re-listen to the recording while driving down the road to work, and it was just another way to the information sync in more. (Graham, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Graham also stated that although it was beneficial to be there live, “sometimes I would miss a few things because I was taking notes, so being able to go back to it helped me fill the gaps” (Graham, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Megan shared Graham’s appreciation of professors providing live lectures and recordings. She stated:

Just like he [Graham] said, I do not always catch things live, so being able to review the recording is very helpful. If you think about it, even if on-campus faculty would record lectures, we could catch things we missed, but they do not do that. (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Megan recalled a time when the live lecture assisted in her not falling behind in her online introduction to communication course. She admitted she had to be out of town for work, and she feared not being able to spend a lot of time on her weekly assignments. However, because the

professor recorded the lecture, “I could sit in a crowded meeting with my earbuds and listen to the professor lecture from the night before. When I got home, I did not feel like I was very behind while being gone all week (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Ester shared her experiences of live online professor communication with use of office hours and recorded live lectures. She recalled:

It was great having the ability to talk one-on-one with my professor to go over assignments. The office hours were great on Sundays as I had a chance to meet with him and double check all my work was received, and his live lectures were also helpful. He would do them on Monday, so I was able to hear him go over what I read earlier in the day and then have the rest of the week to work on it. It was great. (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020)

Ester also claimed having her professor there live, there were times when meetings were heavily populated. She stated, “There were times I had to wait in line to chat with him because so many students took advantage of his office hour, but I still think it was worth the wait” (Ester, personal communication, January 15, 2020).

Cathy shared Ester’s positive experiences with office hours and live lectures in her online professor’s course. From her journal entry, she wrote, “Today’s office hour was very helpful. Dr. Smith was able to clarify the lab that we were all going to start next week. I am glad he went over this with me because the instructions were not very clear” (Cathy, personal communication, March 15, 2020). Cathy also recalled in a focus group that she found the live lectures helpful in understanding a popularly-missed question on the previous week’s exam. She stated:

It was the Monday after the midterm was graded, and apparently most of us missed a series of questions. He [professor] went over the correct answer and why what most of

us chose was wrong. I remember having an ah-ha moment. For me, him going over this verbally was easier to understand. (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020)

With the combination of office hours and live lecture options, Cathy admitted, “It was a nice addition to what my previous professors did not do” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

Laura shared experiences of professor communication techniques she appreciated, but also wished professors had used. She stated:

I really appreciated the weekly phone meetings with my professor. That live time with him was very helpful, even if it was only 15 minutes. Still, I think something like that is essential. And listening to others in this focus group, I wish he would have done an office hour or live video lecture. I think that is a great concept and helps students who work independently understand things better. (Laura, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Laura’s experience with phone meetings was helpful, but she later emphasized that live video meetings and lectures “in all my online courses would have been helpful” (Laura, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Research Question Responses

This section provides a short narrative response to each research question used during data collection. Themes determined with each question are described in this section. The central research question and three sub questions are individually discussed. Direct quotations were chosen to support responses.

Central Research Question

The central research question guided this study: How do online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment? The participants' responses to line of questions from this central research question established four main themes: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. These four themes emerged in every interview, focus group, and journal. While the participants shared experiences and stories of professor communication, they also shared the belief that everyone in an online course should be communicating. Ann wrote, "Although our professor did a good job of communicating with us this week, I have learned that my group members fail in comparison when it comes to communicating. I hope the professor can open their eyes to how one should communicate in this course" (Ann, personal communication, January 19, 2020).

During the focus groups (April 4, 2020; April 5, 2020; and April 7, 2020) when asked the first thing that came to mind when hearing the phrase "professor communication in online classes," the responses were connecting to the themes. Brad said, "constant," and Cathy exclaimed, "needed!" Dawn said, "it is needed," while Ester stated, "there is no such thing as too much." Felicia answered, "I wish there was more," while Graham claimed, "It encourages me." While these stories originated from different courses with different professors, the shared experiences were common, and themes were evident.

Research SQ1

Sub-question one asked, "How do online students describe online social presence connecting professor and student in an online course?" When analyzing the data, one major theme emerged regarding this sub question: approachability. While taking online courses,

participants felt the need to reach out to their professors with questions, clarification, and concerns. However, although there was a need, participants did not always feel comfortable enough to ask questions due to previous actions from previous and current professors. Online professors showing their students they are active in courses and should not hesitate to ask questions was a critical attribute for the participants.

All participants stated there was at least one time when they needed to contact their professor in each course during their online course work experience to ask questions about assignments or voice grading concerns. Ann found that when professors are not active in an online course, she had hesitation in reaching out. She stated:

When I had professors who were sending frequent announcements, replying to discussion forums, and replying back to emails each week, I knew I could always reach out to them. However, when professors had very little activity in class, I was always hesitant that I would receive an answer when I needed it. (Ann, person communication, January 14, 2020)

During the focus group, Ann explained she thought it was “silly to be hesitant” and “important to contact professors no matter what” (Ann, personal communication, April 4, 2020). She claimed students should always reach out to professors when needed, but when professors do not provide a welcoming environment, it can be difficult for students to communicate with questions or concerns.

Megan shared an experience with an online professor when she had a question about a thesis statement in a psychology course. “I emailed to ask her how should wanted the thesis statement formulated and if she could provide an example. She replied back stating students in this course should have had the English pre-req, so I should know” (Megan, personal

communication, January 25, 2020). She stated the professor contacted English professors who taught the prerequisite course to find out if they taught thesis statements. Megan stated:

She then emailed all students the next day, not just me who asked the initial question, to say she reached out to English professors and it has come to her attention that all students should know how to write a thesis statement and understand basic writing elements. If there are questions, go back to the previously taken English course materials. (Megan, personal communication, January 25, 2020).

Megan admitted it was at this point that she did not want to ever contact her professor with questions. Instead, she would research the answers herself or ask classmates. She stated in her journal entry, “I feel that Google or my classmates has better rapport than this professor” (Megan, personal communication, March, 24, 2020).

Brad and Graham believed their academic success came from their professors being very active in their online courses. Brad stated he would always get a sense of his professors in the first week of class by how much they communicated during the week. “If a professor was active in class by replying to discussions and sending out announcements, I felt he could be approached when needed” (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Graham shared a similar experience.

There was a semester when I had a professor how was very active in class, like Brad said, and I know I could always reach out, but there were some who would give very little feedback on graded assignments and were not active in class. I was hesitant to reach out to them. When you question a graded assignment, I always fear there could be tension. With my active professors, I don’t know, I just felt a sense that I could always reach out,

even if it was contradicting a grade or something. (Graham, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

When online professors are active in class, they add a personal touch to the course that can be missing from the on-campus teaching method. This personable method can provide students the approachability that has shown is needed.

Research SQ2

Sub-Question Two asked, “How do online students describe experiences with a professor’s online social presence and its effects on overall course performance?” When analyzing the data, theme three emerged: professor encouragement.

In online courses, professor encouragement was perceived as having a significant impact on students’ overall course performance. The motivation professors provided for students is what allowed them to persevere during trying times. With the balance of taking classes, working a part-time and/or full-time job, and taking care of family, participants found professor social presence and encouragement to be a strong attribute to what assisted them to succeed in class. Laura stated, “With my little girl and working, there were times I wanted to stop school give up or either drop the class and take it again” (Laura, personal communication, January 24, 2020). In the focus group, Kate stated:

A lot of people think online college is easy, but the truth is that it is not. I chose online because of everything on my plate, and there are many times when my school work takes a back burner. I try not to let it, but when I am working and taking care of my family, that extra time people think we have is nonexistent. However, my professors who are very active in class and motivating us make me want to push through and do my work. (Kate, personal communication, February 2, 2020)

Izzy recalled her professor's social presence in a time when it was needed.

I was going through a rough patch with a death in my family, but I noticed one professor was always active in class, so I reached out by email. She asked if she could call me, and I agreed. She called and chatted with me about a plan to stay on top of my school work while grieving. She ended the call with "You got this." It gave me hope, maybe even a sense that someone in such a high position knew I could succeed. (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020)

A social presence has shown to link to professor encouragement from participants' experiences. Yet, the lack of professor social presence and encouragement hindered students' overall course performance and view of online learning. Hank recalled an experience with a professor where there was a lack of social presence and journaled, "My professor was never active in class, maybe just one announcement but nothing else but that. He even failed to grade our work from last week. I did not like that, maybe because I was comparing to other classes" (Hank, personal communication, March 12, 2020). This lack of social presence impacted Hank's decision to contact his professor when guidance was needed. He claimed:

I got behind in his class because of some personal issues. I told myself I wanted to continue the class because I am not a quitter, and I needed some guidance on how to finish. However, I remember sitting at my computer, about to email my professor, and convinced myself that he would not return my email with anything helpful. Looking back, that was a stupid decision, but he had put that image in my mind, and I ended up withdrawing from the course. (Hank, personal communication, January 18, 2020)

Research SQ3

Sub-Question Three asked, “How do online students describe communicative techniques a professor should utilize to assist students throughout the term?” When analyzing the data, two themes emerged: frequent communication and live lecture interaction. When taking online courses, students are provided resources and assignments, but it is up to them to review them and ask questions when needed. Participants’ experiences showed one important communication technique is the amount of communication professors have with their students each week that helps assist with questions before needing to be asked. From a focus group, Dawn stated:

I had one professor who would send out announcements at least three times a week. He would reply to everyone’s discussion posting with questions, and he put great feedback in the grade book. If I emailed him a question, I would get a response back within an hour, unless it was super late at night. (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Hank shared a similar experience when he stated, “I had another professor who was always communicating with us. He was always letting us know he was there if we needed him” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

Brad shared his experience with professor communication techniques when he stated he was falling behind in his class.

I was pretty much off the grid for a week, and my professor called me to check on me. I explained I had some personal issues going on, and he asked if he could text and continue to check on me. I agreed, and he called or texted me twice a week to see how I was doing. This continuous cycle really meant the world to me. He did not have to do that. (Brad, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Brad added from a journal entry, “My professor continues to stay in touch with me. I get nervous about the end of class, but I know he is there to help me succeed” (Brad, personal communication, April 2, 2020).

Participants’ experiences also showed that live interactions and lectures provided them with great assistance during the course. Although many online courses are asynchronous, participants’ experiences showed the option to have synchronous meetings with the professors as a helpful communication technique. Ann, Jamie, Kate, Ester and Cathy stated their online professors held optional weekly virtual office hours that were not required, but “I always tried to attend because I knew that was one time I could have questions answered directly” (Ester, personal communication, April 5, 2020). Cathy stated, “It was really cool to be able to see our professor face to face. It provided a personal touch that I really liked” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020).

In addition to office hours to answer questions, participants’ experiences showed that holding virtual live lectures was a beneficial communication technique. Megan, Felicia, Graham, and Izzy stated their online professors held an online lecture via Zoom each week to go over assignments. “It was very helpful, especially when we were about to work on larger units like papers or projects” (Megan, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Felicia added, “It made it feel like we were in a classroom, and I think it brought us together as a class” (Felicia, personal communication April 7, 2020).

Providing online live lectures has been deemed helpful for students, but when they cannot attend due to work or other obligations, participants shared through experiences that recording the sessions was just as effective. Graham stated:

I had one professor who would hold an online live lecture on Monday at 7 p.m., but I had

to work during that time. He would record the lecture and post the recording to the weekly folder, but also send us an announcement with the link. It was very helpful that he gave us this link in different places, but the fact that he recorded them so we can review at our own time, that was awesome of him. I loved being able to listen to his lectures in my car, but I also got to rewind when needed. You cannot do that during live interaction. (Graham, personal communication, April 7, 2020)

Izzy added that she found the live lecture recordings as helpful to her course success.

If it were not for the recordings, I do not think I would have had a strong understanding of the weekly assignments. I would like to think I would have emailed the professor with questions, but I cannot be sure. With the videos, though, I never had to. Everything was pretty much covered clearly. (Izzy, personal communication, April 5, 2020)

Summary

This chapter provided results originated from data collected from the 13 participants who shared communication experiences in an online college learning environment. Descriptions of each participant were provided. Four themes emerged from the data were provided, each with detailed descriptions. Themes emerged established were (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. Participants' experiences were shared through rich textural and structural descriptions that allowed their stories to be presented and phenomenon to be examined. Quotations from participants and themes were used to support narrative responses to the central research question and three sub questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The theories guiding this study were Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, which examined teaching adults how to learn, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory, which recognized the degree to which a person is seen as a "real person" and focuses on how social effects are caused by the amount of social presence received by others. This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment? Common themes were determined by using multiple data collection methods. The chapter includes a summary of the researching findings relating to the literature review in Chapter Two. Implications of the study are examined, and delimitations and limitations are presented. Finally, recommendations for future research are considered, followed by a final summary.

Summary of Findings

Multiple data collections methods, which included individual interviews, focus groups, and written journals, were used to allow the online community college students to tell their stories. Thirteen online community college students participated in this study. Moustakas' (1994) data analysis methods for transcendental phenomenology were used. I used bracketing to eliminate preconceived notions while viewing online community college students' experiences through a unbiased perspective (Moustakas, 1994). Interview and focus group audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Once transcribed, I provided the transcribed documents to the

participants for review. No corrections were requested by the participants. During data analysis, reflective notes were used during the reading of transcribed interviews and focus groups. Using the reflective notes, I listed significant statements participants used to describe the phenomenon experience. This horizontalization process continued until data saturation was reached (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The significant statements provided me the opportunity to find the underlying meaning of the experience through analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, I used *NVivo* to aid in organizing and analyzing the data. From this analysis, four themes emerged: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. The researched questions that guided this study were addressed by these themes.

Central Research Question: In answering the central research question, online community college students described their communication experiences in an online college learning environment. This central research question strived to understand the overall experiences online college students had with professor communication. Professor communication can create a social presence in online education, which can impact a student's overall course performance. The four themes that emerged through the data analysis showed positive effects from professor communication and negative effects from a lack of professor communication. When asked what came to mind when hearing the phrase "professor communication in online classes," responses were "needed," "constant," "no such thing as too much," and even "encouraging." Ultimately, participants shared their belief that everyone in an online course should be communicating, especially the professor. For example, in Ann's interview, she mentioned the importance for her to communicate with her professor when she had questions or concerns, but her professors should be communicating without student

questions or concerns. For Cathy, she chose online education because being in the classroom was not an option for her, and with frequent communication from professors, “they gave us a real classroom environment feel, which was very important to me” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020). For Hank, a lack of communication from his professor convinced him not to reach out for help when it was needed, and he dropped a course. Although this was a negative experience, it showed Hank how helpful communication from a professor can aid in a student’s academic success. He stated, “It took some time and another class where there was a lot of communication from the professor, but I was able to see the true value on my final grade communication really has” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

The participants shared they had professors with frequent communication and some that minimally communicated. From positive and negative experiences, it was found that frequent communication, approachability, professor encouragement, and live lecture interaction were the most common themes. Each participant provided insight on how online professor communication impacts students’ personal and academic lives.

Research SQ1: In answering the first sub question, online community college students described their experiences with social presence connecting professor and student in online courses. One theme emerged that addressed sub question one: approachability. All 13 participants spoke about the importance of feeling comfortable to communicate with online professors when there were questions or issues. Eleven of the 13 participants recalled a time when they needed to communicate with a professor and how comfortable they felt before doing so. Ester shared her experience regarding professor social presence, and this led her to become comfortable reaching out when there were questions. “I felt like I was emailing a friend or classmate because I was not nervous, you know?” (Ester, personal communication, January 15,

2020). Brad shared experiences with professor social presence and stated he got a sense of how active professors were going to be in class during the first week. He stated professors replying to discussion postings, posting announcements through the week, and replying to emails, calls, or direct messages in a timely manner, he knew “This is a professor I can reach out to if I need anything” (Brad, personal communication, January 16, 2020).

There were three participants who shared they had at least one professor to whom they did not feel comfortable reaching out during an online course. Megan shared her experience with a professor who she deemed rude. Megan stated she reached out to her professor with a question about a thesis statement, and the reply was the Megan should have known the answer because all students in that course should have the necessary prerequisite to have her question answered. Megan continued to state the professor sent out an announcement to the entire class stating she checked with the department, and all students should have prior knowledge about thesis statements, as they already took and passed the English prerequisite. She did not mention Megan by name, but this experience led Megan to avoid approaching the professor any longer. Megan stated, “I just started to Google any questions I had, and if I did not find out, I would just hope for the best. I refused to reach out to her any longer” (Megan, April 7, 2020). Although Graham had positive experiences with professor social presence, he recalled a time where lack of social presence made him hesitant to reach out to his professor. He stated he questioned a grade on an assignment due to very little feedback provided in the graded book, and because of the lack of professor social presence during the term, he feared “there would be tension” (Graham, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

The participants described their experiences with social presence connecting a professor with students. Both positive and negative experiences with this presence led to the conclusion that professor approachability is important in online courses.

Research SQ2: In answering the second sub question, online community college students described their experiences with professor social presence impacting student overall course performance. One theme emerged that addressed sub question two: professor encouragement. All participants shared they were taking online classes while also balancing other obligations, such as work, family, church events, etc. Eleven of the 13 participants recalled a time when they had personal issues interfering with their ability to complete assignments and how professor encouragement or lack thereof impacted their course performance. Laura shared her experience with professor social presence and how that assisted her in pushing through the hardships of working, raising an infant, and taking online courses. She stated when professors were very active in class and motivating, it helped her push through. She claimed, “Just ending an email reply to me with ‘We will get through this together’ or ‘Remember I am here for you’ really gave me that extra drive to succeed and persevere” (Laura, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Izzy added her experience with professor social presence when she was going through some personal issues. She stated her professor set up a communication plan so they could chat frequently. This provided her with hope and encouragement because “someone in such a high position knew I could succeed” (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Hank shared his experiences with lack of a professor’s social presence and how it impacted his course performance and decision to finish. Hank stated he needed help in a course but because his professor was minimally active in class all semester, he decided not to reach out during crucial decision-making time in his college career. “I wish I would have had some

positive experiences with him to know he was there for us” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020). Hank stated he dropped the course, but when looking back and comparing this experience with others where professors were socially present and encouraging, he learned “I needed that motivation during a dark time” (Hank, personal communication, April 7, 2020).

The encouragement participants were given by professors due to the social presence professors had in online courses impacted how well students performed in the course. Even when support and encouragement were not provided, participants shared their understanding of how vital it is to assist students in succeeding in online courses.

Research SQ3: In answering the third sub question, online community college students described communication techniques a professor should use to assist students throughout a course. Two themes emerged during analysis that addressed sub question three: frequent communication and live lecture interaction. All participants shared communication experiences from professors regarding frequency. Six participants recalled experiences when professor communication was limited, and all participants shared at least once instance when a professor provided frequent communication during a course. Kate shared her experiences with a professor who communicated rarely, and she viewed this lack of communication as a detriment to all students. She stated, “We all needed to know she was there. She did not have to be a cheerleader, but for many of us, we needed to know someone was there for us, not just grading and collecting a paycheck, (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020). However, due to having other professors who communicated frequently, she stated, “I knew the lack of communicating with us was not the norm, but some people in my group project really needed the extra communication for help” (Kate, personal communication, April 4, 2020). Dawn shared her views from her experiences of professor communicating techniques stating, “the more the better”

and “there is no such thing as too much” (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020). She claimed the more the professor emailed, posted announcements, provided quality feedback in the grade book, and called or texted, the more students “appreciated our classroom leader” (Dawn, personal communication, April 5, 2020).

Nine of the 13 participants shared experiences of online professors holding virtual meetings with students. Virtual sessions included weekly live office hours and recorded live lectures. All nine participants recalled these virtual sessions as being beneficial to their academic success. Jamie shared her experience with online professors holding virtual office hours and stated it was beneficial because she knew there was a block of time where the professor was there just to help. She claimed, “There was no wait for email replies. He was there live for us to answer questions” (Jamie, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Ann shared her experience with office hour sessions and stated she wished all professors utilized this technique for online courses. She claimed, “They add an in-person feel to an online class. It was really cool, and I never missed a session” (Ann, personal communication, April 4, 2020). Felicia shared her experience of attending live lecture sessions and stated they provided an “eye-opening understanding for assignments that I personally appreciated and think should be a requirement for all classes” (Felicia, personal communication, January 17, 2020). Izzy added from her experiences that live lecture recordings were very beneficial to students who would not attend the lectures during the designated time. She claimed being able to review the recording at her leisure assisted her in understanding material. Izzy recalled being able to review the videos cleared up so many questions that she rarely had to reach out to her professors via email, phone call, or text message.

Participants asserted there is a need for frequent communication from their online professors to provide a sense of comfort and reliability. The use of frequent communication and lack of communication techniques showed participants from their experiences how important communication is to online courses. Likewise, participants who experienced live lecture interaction with online professors learned its importance, both live and when reviewing recordings.

Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The problem guiding this study was students need improved effective communication from the professor throughout an entire course. The information presented in Chapter Two was theoretically and empirically corroborated by the four themes: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. Prior to this study, research that explored online college student experience with professor communication was limited. Previous research focused on types of communication techniques from college professors, both on camps and online (Belair, 2012; Hawkins et al., 2012; Kaufmann, Sellnow, & Frisby, 2016; Lu, 2011; Muir et al., 2019; Vygotsky, 1980), professors' perceptions of their communication (Boling et al., 2014; Burns, Houser, & Farris, 2018; Carboni, 1999; Collins, Groff, Mathena, & Kupcynski, 2019; Hawkes & Good, 2000; Meyers, et al. 2002; Pomeroy, 1997; Stephens & Hartmann, 2002; Yang & Liu, 2004), and student perceptions of communication in college courses, both online and on campus (Cakiroglu & Erdemir, 2019; Dickinson, 2017; Ganayem & Zidan, 2018; Hassini, 2006; Hew, 2015; Hung & Chou, 2015; McBain et al., 2016). As a result of this study, the voices of students

taking online classes at a large urban community college in central North Carolina has broadened the evidence baseline. This section first examines the theoretical literature and then immediately follows with the examination of the empirical literature.

Theoretical Literature

This study added to the current body of research on Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. The theory of adult learning- andragogy- examines teaching adults how to learn, and the social presence theory recognizes the degree to which someone is seen as a "real person" and focuses on how social effects are caused by the amount of social presence received by others. This study examined adult online community college students' experiences of professor communication while taking online courses, thus addressing the gap in the literature and furthering current literature.

Four themes were developed from this study: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy focused on people who demonstrate adult roles, act like an adult, and have an adult self-concept (adult) and how these adults are taught by individuals who strive to meet the needs of each student, institutions of higher learning, and society (andragogy). This study extended this theory with all four themes. While online professors are teaching students, the four themes that emerged from this study are what students need from their professors: frequent communication, approachability, encouragement, and live lecture interaction. These four themes identified needs correlated to the needs of higher education institutions and society, as professors are educating students in the most effective way possible while assisting in strengthening students' skills to be a stronger member of society.

Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory focused on two main concepts: immediacy and intimacy. Immediacy is defined as the measure of psychological distance between communicator and the receiver of his/her communication (McCornack & Ortiz, 2017). Intimacy in communication is affected by physical distance and conversation topic between professor and student. The first three themes that emerged from this study confirm the social presence theory. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) claimed a communicator must be active in his/her efforts to help the receiver of communication understand information more clearly. The theme of frequent communication confirms this theory as participants emphasized the increased quantity of communication assisted them in the understanding of course work.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) stated communication impacts the relationship between sender and receiver of communication regarding clarity and comfort. The approachability theme that emerged from this study confirms this claim. Graham, Megan, and Hank shared the lack of communication negatively impacted their comfort to approach their professor with questions. However, all participants shared experiences when they felt their online professors were very approachable because of the welcoming and constant professor communication in online courses.

The third theme that emerged, professor encouragement, also confirms Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) stated positive communication efforts impact the person receiving the information. When online professors are socially present, the contents of their communication efforts impact how the receiver comprehends the information (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). This study's results showed participants are more encouraged by the amount of communication the professor has and words the professor uses. All participants stated the communication from their professors impacted

their motivation. Hank stated the minimal communication received by his online professor had a strong correlation for him to withdraw from a course because he was unmotivated. However, many in the study stated the frequent communication received by their professors and motivational words they used encouraged them continue with the course and battle through difficult personal issues while taking an online course.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) claimed, “visual media were judged more useful for complex group discussions, private conversations and non-private dyadic conversations. Thus, the presence of visual channel appears to be perceived as an important advantage of a communications medium” (p. 367). This study confirms and extends this claim with theme four: live lecture interaction. Results showed participants preferred some type of visual channel from their online professor, such as live lectures, office hours, or recorded video lectures so they can see their professors, understand the information more clearly, and get a visual connection with their professor. Previously, a visual channel was once known as documents provided by the professor in an online platform (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; McCornack & Ortiz, 2017; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016), but today there are real-time capabilities for professors to interact visually with their students (Brooks & Young, 2016; O’Dowd & Lewis, 2016). In addition, this study extends Short, Williams, and Christie’s beliefs from their claim, “tele-education seems especially promising since educational activities are primarily for cooperative problem-solving and the transmission of information—activities which have been shown to be almost unaffected by the medium of communication used” (p. 129). Although tele-education has gone from “promising” to the “norm” (Jurgens, 2010; Lundberg, 2014; McClenney, 2013), the use of video lectures and recordings for online students to receive the “in-the-classroom feeling” (Snyder & Frank, 2016) provide even stronger transmission of information.

The participants' stories from this study support Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and support and extends Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory. Overall, the themes from this study supported and extended current theoretical literature related to the phenomenon.

Empirical Literature

Since this study focused on the lived experiences of online community college students, it extends the current literature. In 2015, over 13 million students attended community colleges in the United States, and each year, enrollment in online courses increases (AACC, 2015). The participants' experiences provided a clearer picture of online professor communication in online instruction.

From this study's results, participants' experiences revealed online professor communication is essential to student achievement (Coy & Hirshmann, 2014; McCornack & Ortiz, 2017; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013). Student course success rates are impacted by the amounts and types of communication online professors use throughout an entire term (Borup et al., 2013; Mirick, 2016; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). According to study results and online professor experiences, communication in online courses help students understand course material, assignment instructions, and professor expectations. The online community college students in this study confirmed they understand what professors want from them in their assignments and deadlines from the communication they provide (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016; Tsai & Shen, 2013).

Frequent Communication: Hawkins et al. (2013) claimed the quantity of professor-to-student communication has a great impact on students in online courses. Ingerham (2012) found when professors are not available or lack communication, student success decreases in online

learning. Both Hawkins (2013) and Ingerham's (2012) claims were confirmed from this study. When the amount of communication efforts from the professor is high each week, the online community college students in this study felt they were better prepared for the assignments. However, with little communication from professors each week, they felt a sense of worry about their performances and grades. For example, Hank confirmed the lack of communication from his online professor caused him to worry about how well he was doing in class, and it was one reason he decided to withdraw from the course. Ann, unlike Hank, confirmed the vast amount of communication from her online professor helped her get a stronger understanding of assignments and resources, which aided in her earning high grades in the course.

Approachability: Since online community college students in this study confirmed the need to be motivated, the quality of communication being an important characteristic was confirmed (Hawkins et al., 2013). The types of communication, such as positive emails, follow-up messages, phone calls, texts, and even communication signatures showed participants more likely to reach out to professors when needed. Brad shared an experience with a professor who always ended announcements with a positive message like "High Five" or "Rooting for you." Cathy shared a text message she received from a professor that stated she was there for her if she needed anything. The participants in this study confirmed that quality-rich communication like these examples made the professors more approachable than professors with mundane or "copy and paste messages" (Izzy, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

This study added to the existing research on approachability. Dickinson (2017) found students in traditional courses responded positively to professors who treated them with dignity and seemed approachable, even if formal in demeanor. All participants' experiences from this study confirmed this finding but added a different modality in approachability: online courses

instead of traditional on-campus courses. Graham shared his experiences as someone who was taking online courses but had experiences with on-campus courses when he stated it was more important for professors to be approachable online than on campus. Additionally, current literature claims professors need to communicate often and with depth so students feel they are important in class, which enhances the likelihood to approach professors when issues arise (O'Dowd, 2018; Plana-Erta, Moya, & Simo, 2016). Ester and Laura confirmed this claim with their experiences. Ester and Laura realized when their professors communicated with them in discussion forums with questions to further collaboration, they felt as if they were important to helping others understand course material and they were in a working relationship with their professors. In this relationship, they felt they could approach their professors at any time.

Encouragement: Current literature claims professors are less encouraging and inviting when there is minimal communication during the week (Brooks & Young, 2016). This study confirms the impact communication has on encouragement for online students. Hank shared the lack of communication negatively affected his self-esteem, and he was not encouraged to finish a course, causing him to withdraw, also confirming encouragement can affect academic success (Small, 2014). Laura and Kate shared their experiences when having difficulties balancing college courses with work and family. Professors communicated with them frequently during the week and this encouraged them to continue with their courses, confirming that motivation is an important trait for students to receive (Liu, Wang, Kee, Koh, Lim, & Chua, 2014).

Online professors should take the steps to ensure they are engaging and to communicate with students to help motivate them (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Basila, 2014; Mirick, 2016; Moon-Heum & Cho, 2016; Moon-Heum & Scott, 2016; Ringler et al., 2015; Watson, Waston, Richardson, & Loizzo, 2016). The findings from this study confirm this claim. For example,

Felicia shared her experiences with a professor who provided very helpful feedback in the grade book. She stated the professor would ask if things were OK when she did not do well. However, the professor would also show her how to do well on future assignments with her comments but would also add encouraging phrases like “I see so much potential here.” Felicia stated her professor had a style that could show students what they did incorrectly while still maintaining encouragement and motivation, confirming the claim that these two attributes are vital to online learning (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

Live Lecture Interaction: Many online courses are asynchronous to provide students the ability to complete course work without real-time live requirements (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012). Studies have shown incorporating asynchronous video can help improve an online social presence and establish effective communication patterns in online instructions (Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). However, this study’s results from experiences sheds new light on previous research as it showed that adding a synchronous live lecture option to online courses benefits online learners. Dawn, Hank, and Brad shared their experiences with professors holding weekly virtual office hours to assist students by communicating with them in real time. This also confirms findings that online professors should be available, accessible, and responsive (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012), but adds the synchronous element that was not present in current literature, found by this study’s results from participant experiences. Ester, Cathy, Megan, and Felicia shared their experiences of professors holding live lectures each week but recording them for students who had other obligations, not penalizing those who could not attend. Cathy stated her professor never made it a requirement to attend, but “it seemed like we all wanted to attend because it was the best way to show us exactly his expectations” (Cathy, personal communication, January 14, 2020). This supports claims

found in current literature that non text-based interactions are important (Lammers & Gillaspay, 2013; Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012) and more online communication is activity needed (Cole, et al., 2017; Lee & Martin, 2017; Long & Neff, 2018; Skramstad, Schlosser, & Orellana, 2012).

Implications

The Chapter Two literature review presented concepts both absent and present during data collection. Through constant data immersion, the four themes emerged: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. These themes were derived from the one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and written journals of the online college students. This study's findings produced theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. This section addresses these implications and recommendations for online college professors.

Theoretical

This study was based on Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory to provide a voice to community college students who were taking online courses. The focus was to add to the literature on Knowles' (1980) and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) theories, specifically how online community college students were affected by a professor's communication and social presence in online instruction. This study's focus on online community college students' experiences of professor communication and social presence extends the current literature.

This study's theoretical implications hold importance for professor communication for community college students taking online courses. This study's findings confirm Knowles' (1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy that focuses on meeting the goals and needs of each

adult student, higher education institutions, and society (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980; Loeng, 2017). This study's findings also confirm Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory that social presence involves three categories: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Izmirli, 2017).

The results of this study confirmed Knowles' (1980) theory, as an adult learner is someone who acts like an adult, demonstrates adult roles, and uses an adult self-concept. The emphasis of this student was on the methods and practices of teaching adult students (Conklin, 2012; Knowles, 1980; Loeng, 2017). This study's results affirmed Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory, as it is important for a professor to be viewed as someone being "real" (Poquet et al., 2018), and a medium's social effect is caused by amount of social presence received by others (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). The ability to be perceived "present" or "there" creates an emotional connection between professor and students (Lowenthal, 2010). Overall, this study extends the current literature, as it focuses on a specific group of community college students who are taking online classes.

Empirical

The voices of online community college students are missing in research (Borokhovski et al., 2016; Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Oliver, Kellogg, Townsend, & Brady, 2010; Rehn, Maor, & McConney, 2016). Listening to the lived experiences of online students is one way to address and view this issue. Since this study examined community college students' communication experiences in online courses, there are empirical implications for college professors in online class settings.

This study's results are beneficial to online college professors, as these findings confirm the need for professors to create a communicative atmosphere for online students. This study's

results determined online professors' social presence is valued as vital (Lu, 2011). Since online professors are tasked with moderating their courses, it is important that the voices of online students are considered.

Additionally, professors set the tone for how online students can be successful by providing instructions, resources, and explanations. The narratives provided by the online community college students in this study provided a more visible picture of online students' needs, in general. Their experiences confirm the need for professional development to address communication impacts in online instruction (O'Dowd & Lewis, 2016).

Practical

This study's results indicated that for online colleges to address the needs of online students, there needs to be a commitment to communication from online college professors to better assist students each week. Many colleges offer online training certification classes before a professor teaches an online course, but while there is focus on content and platform navigation, there is minimal information to cover communication from the professor to the student (Cahill, 2014). Professional development, a training course, or extra focus in current online certification courses would benefit online professors and their students. The knowledge gained from these additional trainings can be used by online professors to better and more frequently communicate with students to enhance their online college experience (Glazer & Wanstreet, 2011).

Online professors should communicate to their students in a way that is inviting and welcoming. These professors need to show their students that even though the course is virtual, they are always "present" or "there" for them (Lowenthal, 2010). Showing online students that professors are approachable will increase the likelihood for these students to reach out with questions and concerns. A lack of approachability could increase the chances of students'

success rates dropping (Ingerham, 2012). To strengthen an online professor's approachability, professional development, training courses, and specific focus on this topic in online certification courses can be utilized. The techniques and examples learned from these developments and courses can be used in online professors' own courses to enhance approachability to benefit both them and their students (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2012).

In addition to being approachable, findings from this study suggest professors should be encouraging to their online students. Online professors should take steps to ensure they are encouraging and motivating their students (Basila, 2014; Moon-Heum & Cho, 2016; Moon-Heum & Scott, 2016). Online students who feel motivated and encouraged during a course are more likely to achieve higher academic success than without encouragement (Small, 2014), so training courses, professional development, and focus on encouragement in certifications can provide online professors with adequate tools and techniques. With the knowledge of how to encourage online students more effectively, professors can use these skills and techniques to assist students who may not be motivated. This study showed students can be unmotivated in online courses due to family-, social-, work-, and or health-related issues, but when professors are encouraging, it increases the likelihood students will get back on track with their coursework.

Findings from this study suggest professors should have some live lecture and presence in online courses. Being available for a virtual office hour to assist with questions or concerns, holding a live lecture to go over current or upcoming coursework, or recording virtual lectures so students can review them at their convenience all assist in a student's success in online courses (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Parks-Stamm, Zafonte, & Palenque, 2017). Colleges and universities that provide online courses to students should require professors to provide at least one hour of live interaction per week with their students. This hour can be a live lecture that can

be recorded for students who may have other obligations, or it can be a virtual office hour for students to attend if they have questions. This one-hour requirement will be very beneficial for the online professors and students because when professors use multiple means of communication when covering course content, students understand expectations more clearly (Boling et al., 2014; Wombacher, Harris, Buckner, Frisby, & Limperos, 2017).

Delimitations and Limitations

This study has delimitations, meaning I made purposeful decisions to define and limit the study's boundaries. The first delimitation was all participants had to be in good academic standing. It was important for participants to be in this standing because there was a risk that students not in good academic standing may have reached this level because of a lack of care of academic studies and the course in general (MacCann, Fogary, & Roberts, 2012; Margalina, Pablos-Herederó, & Montes-Botella, 2017). This lack of care could also contribute to the lack of focus on professor communication. The second delimitation was that all participants had to have at least one full semester of online course experience prior to the study. Therefore, students who were in their first semester of online instruction could have provided their experiences, but I wanted students who had some experience to have a baseline understanding of professor communication, as this sets precedence for viewing communication during the study timeline (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012; Watson et al., 2011).

There were several limitations in this study. Limitations are deficiencies that cannot be controlled. The first limitation was age. I set the age minimum at 18, which eliminated those younger than 18 to participate in the study. The site used for the study allowed high school juniors and seniors to take college courses via a dual-enrollment program. The second limitation was the type of study. Qualitative research can be difficult to replicate as it requires a natural

setting for data collection. A third limitation was preconceived notions about the questions asked to participants from interviews and focus groups. Although the researcher used bracketing to eliminate preconceived biases (Moustakas, 1994), it is difficult to conclude whether participants also bracketed, which could question the truth in communicating lived experiences (Crewswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). A final limitation was the exclusion of participants from other colleges. Since the study was limited to the large urban community college in central North Carolina, it cannot be determined if other community college students taking online classes face the same issues.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited to adult community college students who had already taken online classes and were currently taking online classes at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. In the future, researchers could replicate this study from rural community colleges across the eastern region of the United States. This study was based on participants who were community college students, at least 18 years old, in good academic standing, and were currently taking online classes. All participants were seeking eventual degrees in higher education, either from the community college or a transferring four-year university. Future research could also expand to other groups such as students from four-year universities, for-profit and non-profit. Those groups could include those who were fully online, as well as those who take a mixture of on-campus and online courses.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The theories guiding this study were Knowles'

(1980) theory of adult learning- andragogy, which examines teaching adults how to learn, and Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) social presence theory, which recognizes the degree to which someone is seen as a "real person" and focuses on how social effects are caused by the amount of social presence received by others.

This study attempted to answer the central research question: How do online students describe communication experiences in an online college learning environment? Data collection methods included individual interviews, focus groups, and written journals. Data was gathered from 13 participants, and Moustakas' (1994) methods, utilized for transcendental phenomenology, were used for data analysis. Four themes emerged: (a) frequent communication, (b) approachability, (c) professor encouragement, and (d) live lecture interaction. These themes were used to provide implications, delimitations and limitations, and suggestions for future research.

Looking into the future, it will benefit online college professors to provide a communicative classroom with a strong social presence. Based on this study and possible future studies, college administration and professors will have a chance to learn from the online community college students' experiences. Therefore, the need to create a communication standard may be implemented. Overall, this research affords a basis for online college professors and administration to enhance their social presence and communication best practices in online instruction to meet the needs of college students and assist them in their academic journeys.

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APPENDIX A: Liberty University IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 17, 2019

William Carpenter

IRB Exemption 4110.121719: Students' Experiences of College Professor Communication in Online Instruction: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Dear William Carpenter,

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

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

(2) Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

(iii) The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

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

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

Sincerely,



G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
 Research Ethics Office

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APPENDIX B: Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
12/17/2019 to --
Protocol # 4110.121719

CONSENT FORM

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF COLLEGE PROFESSOR COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE INSTRUCTION

William Eugene Carpenter
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a college student taking an online course, you are age 18 or older, you have previously successfully completed one online college course, and you are in good academic standing. It is also believed that you have experienced the phenomena of professor communication in an online course, and you are the main person or one of the main persons who can describe experiences of professor communication in an online course. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

William Eugene Carpenter, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of my student is to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina.

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

1. Participate in a semi-structured interview. This interview will take approximately 1 hour and will be audio recorded.
2. Participate in an on-campus focus group that will be audio recorded for data transcription and collection purposes. This will allow the researcher to ask for clarification of information from the interview or for the participant to give additional information that he or she may have thought of after the interview. It will begin with specific questions. This step should take 30 to 45 minutes overall.
3. Participants will submit journal entries, written once per week, with six prompts to guide the thoughts of the experiences during the week. This step should take no more than 10 minutes per week.

Risks and Benefits of Participation: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. Some of the interview questions may make participants feel uncomfortable or result in emotional reactions. Participants may choose what and how much information to disclose, and may decline to answer a prompt at any time. Free personal counseling is available to students through [REDACTED] Counseling Center. To schedule an appointment at the Counseling Center, please call [REDACTED], ext. [REDACTED]. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
12/17/2019 to --
Protocol # 4110.121719

Compensation: Participants who begin and finish all study procedures will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

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.

- Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym, and each interview will be held at a public location that is agreeable with the participant where others cannot easily overhear.
- All data will be maintained in either a locked room or on a computer that is password protected. Data may be used in future presentations pertaining to this study. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the on-campus focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. However, pseudonyms will be used for the online focus 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 Guilford Technical Community College or 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 William Eugene Carpenter. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at (434) 941-7147 or wecarpenter@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Karla Swafford, at knswofford@liberty.edu.

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, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
12/17/2019 to --
Protocol # 4110.121719

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 record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature of Participant


Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

APPENDIX C: Site IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board Approval Form

 Date: 11/14/2019

IRB File NUM: 201905

COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Title: Students' Experiences of College Professor Communication in Online Instruction: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: William Carpenter

Institution/Department: Liberty University

Insurance Coverage: In Place ☒ Not necessary

Action Taken: Exempt from Full Review

 Expedited Review


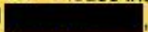

☒ Full IRB Review

Disposition of Application: Approved

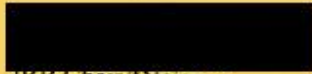
☒ Approved Subject to Restrictions

 Disapproved

Modifications and Comments:

The proposal is approved with the following modification. Within the Informed Consent please add text to the Risks section indicating that: some of the interview questions may make participants feel uncomfortable or result in emotional reactions, they may choose what and how much information to disclose, and may decline to answer a prompt at any time, and  provides free personal counseling to students through its Counseling Center. Please include the following sentence, "To schedule an appointment at the Counseling Center, please call , ext. .

A revised Informed Consent document must be submitted before final approval will be granted. Please note, approval is conditional upon submission of IRB approval from Liberty University. This approval must be submitted before subjects can be recruited.


IRB Chair/Designee

Approval Date*: 11/14/2019

Expiration Date*: 11/14/2020

*Approval of Research is for up to ONE year only. If your research extends beyond one year, the project must be reviewed before the expiration date prior to continuation.

APPENDIX D: Recruitment Letter

November 17, 2019

Dear [REDACTED] online student:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my student is to describe students' experiences of college professor communication in asynchronous online courses at a large urban community college in central North Carolina. The research questions will focus on how online students describe communication experiences in online college learning environments, how you describe online social presence that connects the professor and students, how you describe experiences with a professor's online social presence and it's effects on your course performance, and how you describe communicative techniques a professor should utilize to assist students throughout the term. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are a college student taking an online course, you are age 18 or older, you have previously successfully completed one college course, you are on good academic standing, and you are willing, I ask that you participate in this study. You will be asked to participate in an interview, to participate in a focus group, and to submit journal entries, which could include information such experiences with professor communication, social presence, and communication techniques. It should take approximately five hours for you to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in this study, please read the consent document that is attached to this letter, complete the consent form indicating that you would like to take part in the study, and scan and return it to wecarpenter@liberty.edu or mail it to William Carpenter, 3750 Spring Willow Way, Winston Salem, NC 27107.

Sincerely,

William Carpenter
Doctoral Candidate/Principal Researcher

APPENDIX E: Interview Guide

William Eugene Carpenter

*Students' Experiences of College Professor Communication in Online Instruction: A
Transcendental Phenomenological Study*

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself: your family, your job, and your personal interests.
2. Describe your personal experiences being an online, community college student who is taking another online course. (CRQ)
3. Describe your experience as a student taking online courses. (CRQ)
4. What are some things you could have done differently while taking online courses? (CRQ)
5. What are the most important actions that you believe you can take to be more successful as a student? (CRQ)
6. Describe the term “social presence.” (SQ1)
7. How do you value a social presence from student to professor in online course work? (SQ1)
8. Describe experiences with a professor’s online social presence. (SQ1)
9. How, if at all, did a social presence establish a connection between student and professor? (SQ1)
10. What are the primary reasons that led you to take online courses? (SQ2)

Prompts include:

- Internal factors
- External factors
- Specific events

11. Describe the effects a professor’s online social presence had on your overall course

performance. (SQ2)

12. What effects does a professor's online social presence have on your educational experience each term? (SQ2)

13. Describe what communicative techniques from your professor you believe can assist in helping you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (SQ3)

14. Describe communicative techniques a professor has used that did not assist you in help you become a successful student and meet your academic goals. (SQ3)

15. Describe what communicative techniques from a professor you believe do not assist in helping a student become successful. (SQ3)

16. Finally, what other information would be important for me to know about your views and experiences in professor communication? (CRQ)

APPENDIX F: Focus Group Questions

William Eugene Carpenter

Students' Experiences of College Professor Communication in Online Instruction: A

Transcendental Phenomenological Study

Semi-Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. Please introduce yourselves to the group and share your academic backgrounds. (CRQ)
2. In general, when deciding to enroll in online courses, what was it about online education that was intriguing? (CRQ)
3. What has been the greatest communication technique that each of you experienced while attending college online? (SQ1)
4. What was the primary reason you chose to take classes online? (CRQ)
5. What is the greatest pleasure that each of you have from taking online courses? (CRQ & SQ1)
6. After previously taking an online course, looking back, is there anything you would have done differently (Life choices, class scheduling, communication, time management, or any other significant events)? (SQ1-3)
7. When taking online courses, how does a social presence affect a student's success rate, in your experiences? (SQ2-3)
8. How are courses that are offered primarily in an online format better or worse than being in a seated classroom (technology, lack of live support, or any other major concerns)? Explain. (CRQ & SQ1-3)
9. What are the most important actions a professor can take to assist you in becoming more successful as an online student? (CRQ & SQ1-3)

10. What is required to help each of you become a successful student who will meet your academic goals? (SQ2-3)

11. Do you believe you will be able to meet your personal academic goals if the communication received from your professors stays consistent? Please elaborate. (SQ1-3)

APPENDIX G: Participant Journal Instructions

Dear [Recipient]:

The research project will require that you create a journal writing at least once each week during the study. Specifically, you should address your personal experiences that relate to the topics of professor communication, community college, and online learning. You will be asked to label each journal entry with the date, time, and location of each comment and email them to me in a compiled document during the last week of the semester. Your writings should not exceed 200 words and should be emailed using your college email account. Below are the following prompts, and it is asked that answer as many as you can for each entry:

1. What were some communication experiences in your online class this week? (CRQ)
2. Describe if and how your professor's online social presence connected with you this week. (SQ1)
3. Describe how you feel your professor's online social presence this week impacted your course performance and assignment grades. (SQ2)
4. What communication techniques did your professor use this week that were effective? What techniques were not effective? (SQ3)
5. What communication techniques should your professor have used to better assist you this week? (SQ3)
6. What do you wish others would have told you before taking online courses? (CRQ)

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

William Eugene Carpenter, Doctoral Student

wecarpenter@liberty.edu

APPENDIX H: Focus Group Interview Email to Participants

Hello to all the wonderful participants in my study! I have completed all the one-on-one interviews, and I know you're all working on the journals. From here, the final thing to complete is the Focus Group.

A focus group is when we will meet on campus in room 329. For each, you will take turns answering and usually add dialogue from one another. I would like to start scheduling the focus groups for the next two weeks. Once this is complete, and I trust you will send me the journals in a few weeks, I will send out the Amazon gift cards as compensation and a big "Thank You" for participating.

Focus Group Sign Up:

Saturday, April 4 @ 1pm

1. John

2.

3.

4.

5.

Sunday, April 5 @ 5pm

1. John

2.

3.

4.

5.

Tuesday, April 7 @ 7pm

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

There are five time slots for each day, so please feel free to sign up for all that you can attend. You ONLY need to be part of one focus group, but if you're always available after 4pm each day, then when you sign up for multiple ones, I can put you in a group where others may only have certain days when free. For example, with my schedule, I could sign up for each of them, so the researcher could put me into any time slot he/she sees fit to meet the requirement.

I want to thank you again for the interviews, journaling, and upcoming focus group meetings. I look forward to hearing back very soon.

Sincerely,

William Eugene Carpenter, Doctoral Student

wecarpenter@liberty.edu

APPENDIX I: Sample Interview Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

I want to express my extreme thanks for you being part of my research study. In this email, I attached a transcription of your one-on-one interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments.

If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, it will be assumed you are satisfied with the transcribed document. As always, I thank you so much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

William Eugene Carpenter, Doctoral Student

wecarpenter@liberty.edu

APPENDIX J: Sample Focus Group Transcript Approval Letter

Dear [Recipient]:

I want to express my extreme thanks for volunteering to be part of my research study. In this email, I attached a transcription of the focus group interview. I ask that you please review this document within the next two weeks and let me know if you have any questions or comments.

If I do not hear back from you within the next couple of weeks, it will be assumed you are satisfied with the transcribed document. As always, I thank you so much for your assistance.

Sincerely,

William Eugene Carpenter, Doctoral Student

wecarpenter@liberty.edu