

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

THE PERCEIVED EFFECT OF PROMOTING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN ONLINE
DOCTORAL COURSES THROUGH INTENTIONAL COURSE DESIGN

A Prospectus Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
by
Lucas Austin Farmer

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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APPROVED BY:

Steve Lowe, Ph.D., Dissertation Supervisor
Mary Lowe, E.D., Second Reader

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the sense of community experienced in online courses for Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University. At this stage in the research, sense of community will be generally defined using Rovai's (2002a) definition. Rovai (2002a) defines classroom community using four dimensions: "spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, in this case, learning" (p. 4). Essentially, members of a classroom community, according to Rovai (2002a), experience each of these four dimensions. A number of authors argue that a sense of community can be promoted in online classrooms (Rovai & Baker, 2004; Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017; Lowe & Lowe, 2018). This study will seek to look specifically at how students in the online Doctor of Ministry program at Liberty University describe the sense of community they experienced in a particular online course after the course has been deliberately designed to include increased personal interaction amongst peers.

Many scholars have noted the vital importance of community for online courses. This proposed study will seek to determine what impact certain course design may have on the perceived sense of community experienced in online doctoral courses. The study will utilize a phenomenological design to determine how students describe the sense of community in their online courses by conducting interviews. The sample will consist of Online Doctor of Ministry students enrolled in DMIN 810 offered through the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. The data will be analyzed by looking for consistent, meaningful patterns that help one understand the phenomenon of sense of community in online courses.

Keywords: Online Education, Community, Course Design, Education, Learning

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my amazing wife Karly who helped me endure this rigorous and time-consuming process. I am grateful for her patience and support for me as I spent hours writing, studying, and researching in order to complete this degree.

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Community of Inquiry (CoI)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The field of Christian higher education is changing. The change in the landscape of Christian higher education centers on the fact that an increasing number of courses and programs are being offered in an online format (Maddix, 2013). In fact, Cartwright, Etzel, Jackson, and Jones (2017) would go as far as to say that nearly all Christian universities and seminaries have embraced online learning in recent years. On the whole, online education has been in a state of growth for a number of years (Allen & Seaman, 2017). In a more recent report, Seaman, Allen and Seaman (2018), note that the trend of growth in distance education continues. More specifically, these authors state that “Distance education enrollments increased for the fourteenth straight year, growing faster than they have for the past several years” (Seaman et al., 2018). According to Gallagher (2019), “Online education is one of the fastest growing segments of higher education in the U.S.” (p. 1). Unfortunately, however, many institutions that have embraced online education have also struggled to develop effective learning in an online format (Maddix, 2013). Thus, educators are constantly looking for factors that would positively contribute to meaningful online learning (Young & Bruce, 2011). One of the factors that a number of scholars have identified as an important component to meaningful online learning is a sense of community in the online classroom.

Literature related to Christian education online reveals that the topic of community is frequently studied by researchers in this field. Rovai and Baker (2004) explain that a strong sense of community is simply ideal in a given learning environment. According to Rovai and Baker (2004), a sense of community can be experienced by students within the online classroom, especially in the online classrooms of Christian higher education institutions. Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote (2017) see value in attempting to foster a sense of community in the online

classroom. Yet, these authors caution against simply replicating strategies for fostering community that may be used in a face-to-face classroom since the online learning environment is a unique experience (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). Further, Lowe-Madkins (2016) ranks developing and maintaining a sense of community as one of the most important challenges for educators seeking to establish social presence in an online environment to address. Since a growing number of scholars recognize the importance of promoting a sense of community in online higher education courses, determining how online students perceive and describe the sense of community in their courses would be of great value.

Background to the Problem

Theological Literature

Literature related to the concept of community within Christian online education classrooms is quite prevalent. One of the most frequent discussions within the literature related to Christian education online deals with whether or not community can actually be fostered in the online classroom. At an even more basic level, much literature is devoted to explaining whether or not Christian education itself can be facilitated from a distance. Lowe and Lowe (2010) state that “profound disagreements exist among theological educators regarding the wisdom of delivering theological education at a distance, apart from the salient attributes of a campus community” (p. 85). This disagreement ultimately rests on determining if the task of Christian education can be successfully and effectively accomplished in the online classroom.

Scholars like House (2010) contend that the task of Christian education cannot be facilitated online. According to House (2010), online education is not in line with the biblical pattern of theological education. House (2010) bases his argument on the notion that within the biblical pattern of education there was always a face-to-face element. Hockridge (2013) points

out that the debate surrounding the legitimacy of online theological education often centers on whether or not face-to-face interaction is necessary for formation to occur. According to House (2010) any online course that is without a physical, face-to-face element falls outside of the biblical paradigm of education. The author cites biblical characters like Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and Paul in support of this view (House, 2010). Essentially, according to House (2010), fully online courses are not a legitimate means of accomplishing the task of Christian education. Further, House (2010) seems to define community only in terms of physical, face-to-face interactions that students have with other students, faculty, and administrators. In fact, House (2010) goes as far as to say that online education undercuts student relationships and marginalizes community worship. Though some find House's (2010) view to line up with the biblical paradigm for theological education, a growing number of scholars see theological education as an acceptable means of accomplishing the task of Christian education.

A number of scholars appeal to the letters of Paul to demonstrate that spiritual formation can, in fact, be facilitated from a distance. White (2006) argues that Paul's letters indicate that spiritual formation can occur even when teachers and students are separated by physical distance. White (2006) says that, through his letters, the Apostle Paul nurtured relationships and provided relational support. These practices ultimately paved the way for Paul to nurture spiritual growth even from a distance (White, 2006). Lowe and Lowe (2010) take White's (2006) argument even further by asserting that Paul's interaction with his readers through his epistles support the legitimacy of accomplishing the task of Christian education in online courses. According to Lowe and Lowe (2010), the distance between Paul and his readers did not inhibit his ability to "form them spiritually" (p. 95). In a later work, Lowe and Lowe (2018) make this point even more clearly when they state "Through his epistles, Paul carried out his ministry and influenced

the spiritual development of individuals and his churches” (p. 9). Paul’s letters allowed him to form his readers spiritually even though he was separated from them geographically. According to Maddix and Estep (2010), “spiritual formation is one of the recognized benchmarks of higher education that is Christian” (p. 423). Thus, the assertion that spiritual formation was accomplished by Paul from a distance is clear support that theological education can be accomplished by online courses. This is why Lowe and Lowe (2010) make explicit the implicit when they say that Paul’s epistolary ministry supports theological distance education. Though some individuals are still unconvinced of the legitimacy of theological online education, a growing number of scholars see the biblical and theological precedent for such educational methods.

Theoretical Literature

Having briefly reviewed the theological basis for distance education, it is important to look specifically at what is meant by community in the literature related to online higher education. Unfortunately, this task is not as straightforward as it might seem. Rovai and Baker (2004) explain that even though there is a large body of literature concerning community, there is “no universally accepted definition of the term sense of community” (p. 472). Phirangee (2016) shares the same concern by arguing that the literature on community is somewhat vague in terms of explaining what does or does not constitute a community. The author goes on to contend that there is no consensus on what defines community even within the field of distance education (Phirangee, 2016). Rovai (2002a) defines classroom community using four dimensions: “spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, in this case, learning” (p. 4). Another popular definition for sense of community is offered by McMillian and Chavis (1986). The authors define sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling

that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillian & Chaivs, 1986, p. 9). Though a variety of definitions of sense of community have been offered in the literature in distance higher education, at this stage in the research, Rovai’s (2002a) definition will be adopted as this definition is widely referenced in the literature related to community in the online classroom.

Thematic Literature

The concept of community in the online classroom is not limited to theologically based online courses and programs. In fact, literature explaining the concept of community in online higher education courses is found in a variety of academic disciplines. For example, writing from the perspective of nursing educators, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state that “Online instructors recognize that developing a sense of community in the virtual classroom is a critical strategy for successful online instruction” (p. 133). Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007), who looked specifically at students in MBA programs, concluded that evidence suggests a “significant relationship between sense of community and perceived learning engagement, perceived learning, and student satisfaction” (p. 20). Other examples could be cited as well but the point to be made is that there is a general consensus across disciplines that fostering a sense of community in online courses is ideal for online educators.

It is clear that promoting a sense of community has numerous benefits in the online classroom (Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion, 2009). Thus, it is imperative for educators to determine exactly what factors positively contribute to fostering a sense of community in online courses. To this point, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state “Although the general consensus was that sense of community is desirable, achievable and can be structured, a number of questions and unexplored nuances remain” (p. 143). Young and Bruce (2011) contend that the

focus of faculty and institutions offering online programs should be on how to increase the sense of community. Some researchers like Berry (2017) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012) have been able to demonstrate that instructors impact the sense of community experienced in online courses. Yet, authors like Young and Bruce (2011) have argued that the sense of community in online classes can be promoted by the course design itself. Young and Bruce (2011) state that certain instructional design strategies based on best practices of online education being built into the fabric of the actual courses are one way for potentially promoting a sense of community in online courses. They go on to note that, “Instructors who purposefully design learning activities to create opportunities for students to learn about each other, thereby decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence are likely to improve learners’ sense of classroom community” (Young and Bruce, 2011, p.219). Interestingly, some scholars like Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008) have argued that doctoral level students, in particular, desire to be surrounded by what the authors call an “intellectual community” (p. 121). Further, Walker et al. (2008) contend that establishing an intellectual community does not happen by coincidence but requires purposeful design and effort. The proposed study will seek to discover if certain purposeful design activities could be added to courses in order to improve a learner’s sense of classroom community.

Statement of the Problem

Online education enrollments have been trending upwards for several years in a row (Allen & Seaman, 2017). This trend of growth in distance education enrollment has continued but, interestingly, enrollments are now growing faster than they have in previous years (Seaman et al., 2018). Further, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions were forced to begin offering courses online (Bao, 2020). According to Bao (2020), due to government

requirements and the spread of the Coronavirus disease in China, “most Chinese universities have started online education” (p. 113). Yet, this trend is not limited to China (Bao, 2020). 61 countries across the world have implemented the closure of most universities in terms of face-to-face learning (Bao, 2020). In many cases, the closing of the physical campus resulted in the college or university offering their courses and programs in an online format. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) state “After the announcement of physical closure of schools by the governments as a means of curtailing the global and community rapid spread of the pandemic, the only option available for universities to adopt is online learning” (p. 3). Thus, the closing of colleges and universities across the world as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has likely accelerated the growth of courses being offered online by an incredible rate.

Christian higher education institutions have also been embracing online education for some time (Cartwright, Etzel, Jackson, & Jones, 2017). With online Christian education on the rise, it is becoming increasingly important for Christian online higher education institutions to not simply embrace online learning but ensure that the courses and programs being offered are effectively educating online students. Gallagher (2019) notes that the delivery of online education has become a top priority of academic institutions across the United States. An important consideration concerning effective online education centers on the concept of community in the online classroom. Many researchers have argued that community in the online classroom is ideal and should be a priority for online educators (Rovai & Baker, 2004; Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017; Lowe-Madkins, 2016). Studies have been completed that suggest that a strong sense of community in the online classroom is linked to an increase in program persistence, an increase in retention, and can even have the effect of reversing feelings of isolation (Rovai & Baker, 2004). Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state that

promoting a sense of community in the online classroom is related to numerous positive benefits in the online classroom. Simply put, according to Rovai and Baker (2004), community in the online classroom is “positively related to several desired school outcomes” (p. 473). Seckman (2014) asserts that attention to learning online methods that impact a sense of community in the online classroom is essential for both student and programmatic success.

Since it is becoming widely established that fostering a sense of community in the online classroom is ideal, determining how students in online courses describe the sense of community in their online courses would be of great value. According to Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009), “Although the general consensus was that sense of community is desirable, achievable and can be structured, a number of questions and unexplored nuances remain” (p. 143). It seems of great importance to determine ways in which faculty and course designers could potentially promote a sense of community in online classes. Young and Bruce (2011) argue that instructional design strategies that ask students to learn more about each other on a personal basis could potentially increase the sense of community experienced in the online classroom. This study will explore how instructional design strategies may impact how online doctoral students describe the sense of community experienced in their online courses. More specifically, this study will explore how online doctoral-level students describe the sense of community in courses which were not intentionally designed to increase student-to-student interaction and in a course that was deliberately designed to add course requirements that require students to get to know one another on a personal level and increase peer-to-peer interaction.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe sense of community experienced by online Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in introductory

doctoral courses which were not designed with the goal of community in mind. These courses were DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810. Additionally, this study will seek to describe the sense of community experienced by Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in an online course that was deliberately designed to require increased personal interaction amongst peers. This course is DMIN 810.

Research Questions

The following Research Questions will guide this study:

RQ1. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses *before* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ2. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course *after* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ3. What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?

RQ4. Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

There is one main research assumption that will help to guide this study. This

assumption is that how students in online courses describe the experience of sense of community in online courses is an indicator of actual community being experienced in online courses. Essentially, when discussing a topic like sense of community, researchers must rely on the perceived sense of community and its description in order to study this phenomenon. Thus, this researcher will not seek to prove that the participants' description of sense of community is valid. Instead, the researcher will assume that the description of the sense of community provided by participants can be equated to the actual experience of sense of community in the online classroom.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The delimitations of the study include the following:

1. Currently enrolled Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University.
2. Doctor of Ministry students completing their coursework entirely from a distance.
3. Students who completed DMIN 810 in Fall 2018.
4. Students who completed LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810 in Fall 2017.
5. Measuring the perceived sense of community experienced by the students in Doctor of Ministry courses at Liberty University and does not consider the professor's perception of the sense of community experienced in the online classroom for these courses.

Definition of Terms

1. At this stage of the research, "community" will be defined using Rovai's (2002a) definition. Rovai (2002a) defines classroom community using four dimensions: "spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, in this case, learning" (p. 4). In order to understand precisely what is meant by Rovai's (2002a) definition of community, one will need to be familiar with what the four dimensions of classroom

community actually mean. First, Rovai (2002a) says that spirit “denotes recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and bonding that develop among learners as they enjoy one another and look forward to time spent together” (p. 4). Second, trust “is the feeling that community members can be trusted and represents a willingness to rely on other members of the community in whom one has confidence” (Rovai, 2002a, p. 5). Third, Rovai (2002a) explains that learner interactions can be generally categorized as either task-driven interaction or socio-emotionally driven interaction. Task-driven interaction is interaction that has the goal of completing tasks while socio-emotionally driven interaction focuses on the relationship among the learners in a given classroom (Rovai, 2002a). The final dimension of Rovai’s (2002a) definition of classroom community is commonality of expectations. For Rovai (2002a) and for the purpose of this study, the common expectation in the classroom community is learning. Rovai (2002a) says that learning “reflects the commitment to a common educational purpose and epitomizes learner attitudes concerning the quality of learning” (p. 6). Understanding each of these four dimensions of classroom community is essential for understanding Rovai’s (2002a) definition of classroom community. Having established, in general, what Rovai (2002a) means by each of the four dimensions, a working understanding of classroom community becomes clear.

Significance of the Study

The implications of the proposed study could have practical, theoretical, and pedagogical implications. If it can be determined that adding certain course requirements to an online Doctor of Ministry course contributed to students describing a felt sense of community in this course, these course design elements could be added into future online courses to help

foster a sense of community. The study could give educators a very practical way of promoting a perceived sense of community in the online classroom. Thus, the study could ultimately affect how educators and administrators think about designing online classes. Knowing what elements of course design potentially impacted a student's experience of community in the online classroom could be of great value for researchers in the field of online learning as well, especially since a strong sense of community has been linked to increased retention and increased program persistence (Rovai & Baker, 2004).

It appears that much has been written on the idea of community in the online classroom. In fact, many researchers have identified that a sense of community is ideal in online classes (Rovai & Baker, 2004; Young & Bruce, 2011; Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, & Killion, 2009). However, the gap in the literature stems from a lack of studies on whether or not certain course design elements being added to a course that increases student to student interaction impacts how students describe the sense of community in the online classroom.

Summary of the Design

The proposed study will be conducted using qualitative research methods. More particularly, the study will utilize a phenomenological research design, which is one of five major qualitative research designs. The data will be collected by conducting phenomenological interviews. From these interviews, the goal will be to determine how students in DMIN 810, LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810 describe the sense of community experienced in these courses.

Before this study began, students in the online Doctor of Ministry Program could begin their program by taking LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810 as their introductory course. In Fall 2018, the program requirements for the online Doctor of Ministry Program changed so that

all students were required to take DMIN 810 as their first course in the Doctor of Ministry Program. The DMIN 810 course was deliberately designed in order to attempt to promote an enhanced sense of community in the course. Essentially, the course was designed with certain elements that require students to engage with one another on a personal level. These course requirements do not ask students to interact with additional course materials or concepts. Rather, they are specifically designed to increase social interaction between students, which Young and Bruce (2011) suggest could improve a learner's sense of community in the online classroom.

This study will seek to determine how students describe the sense of community in LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810, which were not deliberately designed with the goal of increasing student-to-student interaction. Additionally, this study will seek to determine how students describe the sense of community in DMIN 810, which was deliberately designed to foster increased interaction among peers in the class. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), the goal of phenomenological interviewing is "to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share" (p. 104). Thus, this researcher will conduct in-depth interviews of the participants from each of the four courses with this goal in mind.

Research Population

The population of this study will consist of all Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University who have taken DMIN 810, LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810.

Research Sample(s) and Sampling Technique

The research sample for this study will consist of all students from a single section of DMIN 810, LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810. More specifically, the sample will consist of all students from a single section of DMIN 810 that completed the course in the first term it

was offered in Fall 2018. The sample will also consist of all students who completed LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810 in Fall 2017, which was before DMIN 810 was offered and required. The enrollment for a single full section of these courses varies. However, the number of students enrolled in a single full section is approximately 10. Each student in the selected sections will have the opportunity to participate in the study.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Before one delves into completing a massive research project like a doctoral dissertation, the researcher must first become familiar with the literature related to the research topic. Quite a bit of research has been conducted on the topic of theological distance education and the concept of community in the online classroom. Thus, in order to effectively study the literature related to this topic, it is most appropriate to evaluate the literature using three distinct categories: theological, theoretical and related literature. This chapter of the dissertation will focus on bringing to light the salient issues related to the concept of community by reviewing theological, theoretical, and related literature.

Theological Framework for the Study

The Need for a Biblical Foundation

When studying the topic of Christian education, it is essential to consider the role the Bible plays for the issues at hand. It should come as no surprise that the Bible is consistently viewed as the most important foundation for Christian education. According to Pazimino (2008), “Scripture is the essential source for understanding distinctively Christian elements in education” (p. 19). In other words, Christian education cannot be properly understood apart from God’s Word. This is why Pazimino (2008) goes on to contend that both the thoughts and practices of the Christian educator must be guided by the truths revealed in God’s Word if he or she is going to faithfully serve Christ through education.

Throughout history, those who have followed God and sought to live their lives for him have connected God’s Word with the task of education. Even the earliest followers of God recognized the need for Scripture to serve as the foundation of one’s education. According to

Anthony and Benson (2011), the early Hebrews saw God's Word as the ultimate manual on how to live. The people of the Old Testament understood that the Word of God was meant for people's instruction (Anthony & Benson, 2011). During the middle ages, Reformers like Martin Luther sought to get the Scriptures into the hands of the masses so they could read and study the Scriptures personally (Anthony & Benson, 2011). Luther thought that the disciplined study of the Bible was essential for the Christian life (Anthony & Benson, 2011). According to Sittser (2007), reformers like Luther "considered preaching their primary duty and highest calling, which in turn reflected their belief in the Word of God" (p. 211). The primacy of Scripture in the Reformation period highlights its central place in the history of the Christian faith. During the Sunday School movement, it was the Bible that served as the textbook that led curricular matters (Anthony & Benson, 2011). As one reads through the numerous periods of Christian history surveyed by Anthony and Benson (2011), it becomes overtly clear that in each of these periods there was a common thread: a biblical foundation. From the Hebrews, to the Reformers, and on to the leaders of the Sunday School movement, Christian education has always been founded upon God's Word in the Holy Scriptures (Anthony & Benson, 2011). The authors note that one of the most important considerations for the Christian educator in the Twenty-first-century is that "the authority of the Scriptures is foundational for life" (Anthony & Benson, 2011, p. 375). Anthony and Benson (2011) also warn that "history is replete with examples from generation to generation regarding misdirection and social waywardness as a result of losing the authority of Scripture as a guiding principle for life" (p. 375). The history of Christian education demonstrates clearly that the discipline of Christian education cannot be grasped without the Word of God as the foundation.

In their introductory work on Christian education, Estep, Anthony, and Allison (2008) likewise argue that the Bible is the principal foundation of Christian education. When commenting on the nature of the Bible, the authors state “Not only does it supply the content of Christian instruction, but it also provides direction, models of educations, methodology, and a rationale for Christian education” (Estep et al., 2008, p. 44). Estep et al. (2008) state “Scripture is the primary lens through which the Christian educator perceives and prescribes the character of education in the church” (p. 44). Yount (2010) states “For education to be rightly called ‘Christian,’ it must be built upon the sure foundation of God’s Word” (p. 6). It appears that the task of Christian education cannot be accomplished adequately apart from God’s special revelation in the Christian Scriptures.

A Biblical Mandate

It is important to note that, according to Scripture, Christian education is an essential task for the believing community and not an optional preference. Christian education is divinely mandated by God as an essential task of the Christian church (Estep et al., 2008). Yount (2010) sees the church primarily as a “reaching-teaching institution” (p. 1). According to Yount (2010), the task of teaching is an essential task for the local church based on what one reads in the Scriptures. The essential nature of Christian education is made clear throughout both the Old and New Testament Scriptures. Perhaps one of the most overt passages that speaks to the essential nature of Christian education is the passage in Matthew 28 commonly referred to as the Great Commission.

Matthew 28:19-20, in particular, contains some significant insights into the nature of Christian education. It says “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have

commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20, *English Standard Version*). Even a cursory reading of this passage reveals the educational nature of Jesus’ charge. The phrase “make disciples” itself has implications for the task and field of Christian education. Turner (2008) contends that “A disciple is literally one who follows an itinerant master” (p. 690). This is what Jesus’ disciples have done throughout his time on earth (Turner, 2008). Yet, Jesus’ time on earth is drawing to a close and discipleship will now take on a more metaphorical meaning (Turner, 2008). Moving forward, according to Turner (2008), “Following Jesus will entail understanding and obeying his teaching” (p. 690). As Jesus prepares his disciples for his departure from the world, making disciples takes on a new meaning. Instead of focusing on following a traveling master from place to place, discipleship now pertains principally to Jesus’ teaching. The rest of Matthew 28 demonstrates that disciples of Jesus Christ are those who not only understand His teaching but also teach others what they have learned from Christ. Evans (2012) explains that, in this passage, the disciples are being commanded to make other disciples. Blomberg (1992) indicates that the teaching and baptizing referenced in the passage is directly connected to disciple-making. In fact, according to Blomberg (1992), teaching is the very heart of disciple-making. In this vein, Case-Winters (2015) explains that “To ‘disciple’ means ‘to teach;’ a disciple is a learner” (p. 339). The author goes on to state that “The outreach to the Gentiles must include the teaching of the law; teaching all nations to obey everything that Jesus, the authoritative interpreter of the law, has commanded them” (Case-Winters, 2015, p. 339). Keener (2006) asserts that one of the most significant aspects of this passage is that true disciples will carry on Jesus’ mission of teaching the kingdom. According to Keener (2006), this passage shows that discipleship is much more than conversions but involves thorough training as Jewish teachers taught their students in Jesus’ day. Evans (2012) states “The

new disciples are to learn what Jesus had taught the original disciples” (p. 486). Thus, it seems that the call to making disciples cannot be separated from teaching others about the kingdom. For this reason, Estep et al. (2008) claim that churches that are not accepting and accomplishing the task of Christian education are not fulfilling Christ’s call to make disciples of all nations.

Essentially, true disciple-making cannot occur without Christian education. Anthony (2001) notes that, over the years of Christian history, the essential nature of Christian education has not changed. There are still people in the world who need to hear the message of redemption through Christ and learn how to know God (Anthony, 2001). Thus, until Christ returns, Christian education will remain a primary and divinely ordained task of the Christian community.

Christian Education and Whole-Person Development

Since Christian education is a biblically mandated task of primary significance for believers today, it is important for followers of Christ to understand exactly what the task of Christian education entails. It seems that the natural inclination of educators is to focus on informing the minds of learners. However, the task of Christian education is much more than simply informing minds. Distinctively Christian education is characterized by a commitment to whole-person development. According to Knight (2006), throughout the Bible, human beings are treated as holistic units. The human race is never considered to be dualistic or pluralistic in Scripture (Knight, 2006). Knight states “The whole-person is important to God” (p. 208). In his book on the subject of faith and learning, Dockery (2012) explains that the whole of the human personality must be involved when it comes to shaping how Christians think. Dockery (2012) states “Our mind is to be renewed, our emotions purified, our conscience kept clear, and our will surrendered to God’s will” (p. 22). Lowe and Lowe (2018) likewise see God being concerned with the whole-person. The authors state “There is a holistic trajectory to the way we grow and

develop both personally and corporately” (Lowe & Lowe, 2018 p. 132). Lowe and Lowe contend that Lord Jesus himself is a perfect example of whole-person development, based on Luke 2:52. Luke 2:52 says “And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.” Knight (2006) is in agreement with this assessment since this author also cites Luke 2:52 passage as evidence that God is concerned with the development of the whole person. Further, Chandler (2015) indicates that the Bible is clearly concerned with the development of whole persons. Thus, the author argues accordingly that “in order for education in the Christian academy and in ministry to be optimized for the development of the whole person, a fresh approach from a multi-disciplinary perspective is needed” (Chandler, 2015 p. 315). Essentially, then, it seems that the realization that God is concerned with whole persons should alter the way that educators accomplish the task of Christian education.

Lowe and Lowe (2018) note that God’s concern for the whole person should lead to a goal of whole-person transformation. Moral, social, emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual components all work together to form the whole person (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Therefore, all of these components should be transformed into the likeness of Christ (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). In the same vein, Chandler (2015) asserts that:

To be transformed into the image of Jesus involves not only spiritual formation, as foundational as this is, but also the formation and stewardship of other dimensions, including the emotions, relationships, intellect, vocation, the physical body, along with the stewardship of God-given resources including the earth, money, and possessions. (p. 315)

It is not only one aspect of the human being, such as the mind, that educators should be concerned with. Rather, Christian educators should be concerned with the transformation of

every component that makes up a human being. Smith (2009) offers a helpful statement in this regard when he says “Being a disciple of Jesus is not primarily a matter of getting the right ideas and doctrines and beliefs into your head in order to guarantee proper behavior; rather, it’s a matter of being the kind of person who loves rightly” (p. 32). According to Smith (2009), Christian education then is not primarily about the transfer of knowledge from one person to the next but rather the transformation of whole-persons. Smith (2009) states “education is a holistic endeavor that involves the whole person, including our bodies, in a process of formation that aims our desires, primes our imagination, and orients us to the world” (p. 39). Education should never focus exclusively on informing a person’s mind or presenting people with facts. Every aspect of the human being should be developed and matured as a result of properly designed Christian education curriculum. The task of Christian education is a whole-person endeavor.

Distinctive Christian Community

While Christian education aims at the development of the whole person, it was never meant to occur in isolation. From the very beginning of humanity’s time on earth, human beings were meant to be in community. In Genesis 2, God plainly says that “Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Genesis 2:18). McGinniss (2008) says that one of the nine specific implications that come out of Genesis 2:21-25 is that man being alone was not good according to God’s own words. The creation of woman caused the man to rejoice (McGinniss, 2008). Commenting specifically on the Genesis 2:18 passage, Matthews (1996) says that, though man was certainly created to live in fellowship with God, man was also created to build relationships with other human beings. More frankly, according to Matthews (1996), isolation was never God’s plan for mankind. God created

community and man is meant to be involved in it (Matthews, 1996). God's ideal is that people live, grow, and flourish in the context of community and not in isolation.

While God's creation of community is first outlined in the book of Genesis, it is a concept that can be seen throughout the biblical story. Both the Old and New Testaments articulate that community is God's ideal and that human beings are meant to be involved in community. Grenz (1994) says that community is central to the Bible's message. According to Grenz (1994), "From the narratives of the primordial garden which open the curtain on the biblical story to the vision of white-robed multitudes inhabiting the new earth with which it concludes, the drama of the Scriptures speaks of community" (p. 24). More specifically, the Scriptures show that the people of God are uniquely called to live, grow, and flourish in the context of community. To this end, Grenz (1994) writes "God's program is directed to bringing into being of community in the highest sense—a reconciled people, living within a renewed creation, and enjoying the presence of their Redeemer" (p. 24). If God is chiefly concerned with community, it should come as no surprise that examples of community are seen throughout both the Old and the New Testaments.

Community in the Old Testament

Community is arguably one of the most important themes that runs throughout the Bible (Grenz, 1994). In the Old Testament, it is God's people, those individuals who have a right relationship with God compared to those who do not, that have a distinct calling to live in community with God and community with other people (House, 2013). One text, in particular, that highlights the reality of community in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 15:1-11. In this passage, Moses outlines a number of principles that the Israelites, as God's people, are to put into practice. These principles include having compassion on the poor and being generous with

what the Lord has provided (Deut. 15:7-10). While the principles Moses calls the Israelites to are both important and timeless for all generations and all peoples, he is specifically calling God's people to live in a particular way in light of their relationship with God. Thus, the concept of community is foundational for rightly understanding this passage. Block (2012) says that this section of Scripture shows the spirit of what it means to live as a member of the covenant community of God. Summarizing Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Block (2012) writes "Pleading pastorally for a willing application of the first and foremost commandment, Moses calls the people to demonstrate their love for Yahweh by loving their neighbors" (p. 377). Importantly, according to Boloje (2018), it is Israel's relationship with Yahweh that gives the nation its distinctiveness as the people of God. As a result of this relationship with Yahweh and being a distinct community as God's people, there are implications for life in society (Boloje, 2018). More succinctly, there is a relationship "between faith and life in the community of humanity" (p. 5). Israel's relationship with God drives her to certain actions within the world. This distinctive community is meant to live in a certain way because they are in right relationship with God. More broadly, this right relationship with God is expected to transform society itself (Boloje, 2018).

When commenting on Deuteronomy 15:1-11, Boloje (2018) says "The vision which is expected to be an ideal or a lived reality in a covenant community of Yahweh's people invites community members to a recognition and appreciation of the obvious reality of members' social needs and practical social responsibility" (p. 5). Block (2012) says that the vision posited in this passage highlights a vision for the community of that that should be applied to God's people in every age. Though several other passages in the Old Testament Scriptures highlight the importance and implications of community as it relates to God's people, Deuteronomy 15 1-11

clearly reveals that God's people are meant to live in community with God and with other people. Additionally, the passage teaches that, as a result of being part of the covenant community, God's people are meant to live in a way that demonstrates God's love to all people. Unsurprisingly, the importance of community and the implications of being part of a community that centers on a relationship with God is further highlighted in the New Testament Scriptures.

Community in the New Testament

Evidence of community in the New Testament abounds. Jesus' ministry was one that prioritized community. During this time on Earth, Jesus did not conduct his ministry in isolation but rather Christ carried out his mission by calling others to come and follow him. The calling of the disciples in Matthew 4:18-22 provides an excellent example of Jesus' emphasis on community. Essentially, Jesus called his disciples to be part of a distinct community to carry out his mission (Kostenberger, 2013). In his commentary on Matthew 4:18-22, Kostenberger (2013) refers to Jesus' disciples as "his messianic community" (p. 40). Likewise, France (2007) refers to the calling of the disciples as the founding of the messianic community. Additionally, according to Kostenberger (2013), "In calling the Twelve, Jesus gathers a new Israel, which he commissions to carry out his messianic mission" (p. 40). Jesus deliberately selected twelve disciples to mirror the number of the Old Testament tribes of Israel (Kostenberger, 2013). Therefore, it seems obvious that Jesus meant to further iterate the importance of community by relying on foundations previously established in the Old Testament. France (2007) contends that the placing of the incident involving the calling of the messianic community at the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry was intentional. To this end, France (2007) writes:

It is significant that his first recorded action is to gather a group of followers, who will commit themselves to a total change of lifestyle which involves them in joining Jesus as his essential support group for the whole period of his public ministry. (para 2)

After the calling of the disciples, Jesus is constantly seen carrying out his mission in the context of this messianic community. Thus, the account of Jesus' story as articulated by Matthew is not simply one of Jesus alone but also the community that surrounds him (France, 2007). Therefore, as one views the Gospel accounts through this lens, it is evident that Jesus was concerned with establishing and promoting a ministry that had community at its very core.

Studying the early church reveals that the disciples understood and likewise implemented what Jesus was teaching them about community. The early believers were characterized by their emphasis on community. After Jesus' ascension, the disciples did not retreat to be in isolation but rather they immediately gathered with other believers to pray (Acts 1:14-15). Acts 2:1 says that the early Christians were "all together in one place." As the Holy Spirit came upon the early followers of Christ, they were gathered together in community (Acts 2:1-13). This early Christian community was devoted to the teaching of the apostles, fellowship, breaking of bread and to prayers (Acts 2:42). In the book of Acts, the early Christians are referred to by Luke as the church or *ekklesia*. According to Easley (2013), "the principal way Luke uses *ekklesia* is to refer to local, self-conscious groups of Jesus' followers" (p. 68). Grenz (1994) says that the church can be referred to specifically as the "community of Christ" (p. 370). The early church, as identified by Luke, was committed to the apostles teaching, love, worship, and evangelizing (Easley, 2013). The early church spent time meeting with one another for religious gatherings, worshipping God, praying, and witnessing about Jesus Christ (Marshall, 2008). Importantly, the actions and lifestyle of the early church had an impact on the people around them (Garland,

2017). The distinctiveness of the early believers pointed others to the reality of Christ. To this point, Garland (2017) says that the early Christians “witnessed with more than just words; they presented a distinctively alternative lifestyle” (p. 34). As was the case with the Old Testament people of God, being part of the Christian community in the New Testament resulted in life change. The early church, like God’s people in the Old Testament, showed the love of God by living in relationship with God and with other people. Even a casual reading of the book of Acts demonstrates that the early church was distinct compared to the people around them. This early Christian community carried out God’s mission on earth by reflecting Christ to those around them by living a distinctively Christian lifestyle. One simply cannot read the book of Acts without noting the central role community had. In fact, it can be argued that one cannot separate the Christian church from the idea of community. To be part of the church is to be part of a distinct community. Because community is an inherently biblical concept that finds its foundations throughout the Bible, Christian educators must seek to incorporate community into their online classrooms.

Distinctive Christian Community Online

Interestingly, some scholars make a specific connection between the field of Christian education and the concept of community. Anthony (2001), summarizing the work of James W. Fowler’s theory of faith development, shows how the concept of community is central to the concept of faith in general. Faith, by its very nature, is relational, which makes “community central to expressions of faith” (Anthony, 2001). More specifically, Anthony (2001) demonstrates how community is central to the Christian faith in particular. When the apostle Paul tells the Ephesian Christians to walk in a manner worthy of their calling, the idea of vocation is in Paul’s mind (Anthony, 2001). Even one’s vocation, according to Anthony (2001),

is never meant to be lived out in isolation but instead in the context of community. Community is central to living the Christian life in a manner that is pleasing to the Lord. Community was designed and created by God from the beginning of time and, therefore, Christian educators cannot neglect this important aspect of the Christian faith as they seek to educate believers in an effective manner.

Christian Education Online

Since community was created by God and is essential for living the Christian life well, it should likewise be considered an essential aspect of a good Christian education paradigm. Literature related to the concept of community within Christian online education classrooms is quite prevalent. One of the most frequent discussions within the literature related to Christian education online deals with whether or not community can actually be fostered in the online classroom. At an even more basic level, much literature is devoted to explaining whether or not Christian education itself can be accomplished from a distance. Lowe and Lowe (2010) state that “profound disagreements exist among theological educators regarding the wisdom of delivering theological education at a distance, apart from the salient attributes of a campus community” (p. 85). This disagreement ultimately rests on determining if the task of Christian education can be successfully and effectively accomplished in the online classroom.

Scholars like House (2010) contend that the task of Christian education cannot be accomplished online. According to House (2010), online education is not in line with the biblical pattern of theological education. House (2010) bases his argument on the notion that within the biblical pattern of education there was always a face-to-face element. Thus, any online course that is without a physical, face-to-face element falls outside of the biblical paradigm of education. The author cites biblical characters like Moses, Elijah, Jesus, and Paul in support of

this view (House, 2010). Essentially, according to House (2010), fully online courses are not a legitimate means of accomplishing the task of Christian education. Further, House (2010) seems to define community only in terms of physical, face-to-face interactions that students have with other students, faculty, and administrators. In fact, House (2010) goes so far as to say that online education undercuts student relationships and marginalizes community worship. Though some find House's (2010) view to line up with the biblical paradigm for theological education, a growing number of scholars see online theological education as an acceptable means of accomplishing the task of Christian education.

A number of scholars appeal to the letters of Paul to demonstrate that spiritual formation can, in fact, be accomplished from a distance. White (2006) argues that Paul's letters indicate that spiritual formation can occur even when teachers and students are separated by physical distance. White (2006) says that, through his letters, the Apostle Paul nurtured relationships and provided relational support. These practices ultimately paved the way for Paul to nurture spiritual growth even from a distance (White, 2006). Cartwright et al. (2017) note that Paul saw his letters as a way to be personally present even when he was physically separated from his audience. Paul's letters, according to Cartwright et al. (2017) made possible what the authors call "absent presence" (p. 21). Lowe and Lowe (2010) along with Cartwright et al. (2017) assert that Paul's interaction with his readers through his epistles supports the legitimacy of accomplishing the task of Christian education in online courses. According to Lowe and Lowe (2010), the distance between Paul and his readers did not inhibit his ability to "form them spiritually" (p. 95). In a later work, Lowe and Lowe (2018) make this point even more clearly when they state "Through his epistles, Paul carried out his ministry and influenced the spiritual development of individuals and his churches" (p. 9). Paul's letters allowed him to form his readers spiritually even though he

was separated from them geographically. According to Maddix and Estep (2010), “spiritual formation is one of the recognized benchmarks of higher education that is Christian” (p. 423). Thus, the assertion that spiritual formation was accomplished by Paul from a distance is clear support that theological education can be accomplished by online courses. This is why Lowe and Lowe (2010) make explicit the implicit when they say that Paul’s epistolary ministry supports theological distance education. Though some individuals are still unconvinced of the legitimacy of theological online education, a growing number of scholars see the biblical and theological precedent for such educational methods.

Theoretical Framework Introduction

While the task of Christian education remains unchanged, the field of Christian higher education is changing. The change in the landscape of Christian higher education centers on the fact that an increasing number of courses and programs are being offered in an online format (Maddix, 2013). In fact, Cartwright, Etzel, Jackson, and Jones (2017) would go as far as to say that nearly all Christian universities and seminaries have embraced online learning in recent years. On the whole, online education itself is in a state of growth (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Unfortunately, however, many institutions that have embraced online education have also struggled to develop effective learning in an online format (Maddix, 2013). According to Bao (2020), as a result of universities being closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and being forced to move their courses online, best practices for online higher education are being identified so that institutions can more effectively educate in the midst of the pandemic. Educators are constantly looking for factors that would positively contribute to meaningful online learning (Young & Bruce, 2011). One of the factors that a number of scholars have identified as an

important component to meaningful online learning is a sense of community in the online classroom.

Literature related to online Christian education reveals that the topic of community is frequently studied by researchers in this field. Rovai and Baker (2004) explain that a strong sense of community is simply ideal in a given learning environment. According to Rovai and Baker (2004), a sense of community can be experienced by students within the online classroom, especially in the online classrooms of Christian higher education institutions. Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote (2017) see value in attempting to foster a sense of community in the online classroom. Yet, these authors caution against simply replicating strategies for fostering community that may be used in a face-to-face classroom since the online learning environment is a unique experience (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). Further, Lowe-Madkins (2016) ranks developing and maintaining a sense of community as one of the most important challenges for educators seeking to establish social presence in an online environment to address. Since a growing number of scholars recognize the importance of promoting a sense of community in online higher education courses and since the concept of community finds its foundation in Scripture, determining how online students perceive and describe the sense of community in their online courses would be of great value.

The Concept of Community in Online Higher Education

Having briefly reviewed the theological basis for distance education as well as the biblical and theological foundation for community, it is important to look specifically at what is meant by the term community in the literature related to online higher education. Unfortunately, this task is not as straightforward as it might seem. Rovai and Baker (2004) explain that even though there is a large body of literature concerning community, there is “no universally

accepted definition of the term sense of community” (p. 472). Phirangee (2016) shares the same concern by arguing that the literature on community is somewhat vague in terms of explaining what does or does not constitute a community. The author goes on to contend that there is no consensus on what defines community even within the field of distance education, which has led to some confusion as to what does and does not constitute a community (Phirangee, 2016). The lack of consensus on a universally accepted definition of the term community in distance education has led to a variety of definitions (Phirangee, 2016). A brief survey of some of the definitions of community that have been offered by scholars will help demonstrate the imprecise nature of the term community in online education literature.

According to Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) a learning community in an online context can be defined as:

A group of people, connected via technology mediated communication, who actively engage one another in collaborative learner-centered activities to intentionally foster the creation of knowledge, while sharing a number of values and practices, including diversity, mutual appropriation, and progressive discourse. (p. 10)

Rovai (2002a) defines classroom community using four dimensions: “spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, in this case, learning” (p. 4). Another popular definition for sense of community is offered by McMillian and Chavis (1986). These authors define sense of community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillian & Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Though a variety of definitions of sense of community have been offered in the literature in distance higher education, at this stage in the research, Rovai’s (2002a) definition will be adopted.

The Need for Community in Online Courses

The need for community in online courses is increasingly becoming common knowledge for educators who are teaching, designing, and offering courses in an online format. Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens (2012) state that “creating a cohesive online community is a vital component of all online programs” (p. 121). Likewise, Palloff and Pratt (2007) go as far as to say that research suggests “the key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as the vehicle through which learning occurs online” (p. 4). The concept of community in the online classroom is not limited to theologically based online courses and programs. In fact, literature explaining the concept of community in online higher education courses is found in a variety of academic disciplines. For example, writing from the perspective of nursing educators, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state plainly that “Online instructors recognize that developing a sense of community in the virtual classroom is a critical strategy for successful online instruction” (p. 133). Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, and Lee (2007), who looked specifically at students in MBA programs, concluded that evidence suggests a “significant relationship between sense of community and perceived learning engagement, perceived learning, and student satisfaction” (p. 20). Palloff and Pratt (2007) provide a helpful summary on the importance of community as it relates to online learning when they state “in distance education, attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful” (p. 40). On a related note, Hedge (2011) says “One factor contributing to the success in online education is the creation of a safe and vibrant virtual community and sustained, lively engagement with that community of learners” (p. 13). Hedge (2011) goes on to argue that community in the online theology classroom is “an essential component of successful online education” (p. 13). Other examples

could be cited as well but the point to be made is that there is a general consensus across disciplines that fostering a sense of community in online courses is ideal for online educators.

It is clear that promoting a sense of community has numerous benefits in the online classroom (Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion, 2009). Unfortunately, authors like Da Graca (2016) have argued that building community in online schools is a challenge. The physical distance that separates faculty and students can make students feel isolated (Da Graca, 2016). Yet, Da Graca (2016) contends that there are factors of learning that can influence an online learners' sense of community in the online classroom. Thus, it is imperative for educators to determine exactly what factors positively contribute to fostering a sense of community in online courses. To this point, Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state "Although the general consensus was that sense of community is desirable, achievable and can be structured, a number of questions and unexplored nuances remain" (p. 143). Young and Bruce (2011) contend that the focus of faculty and institutions offering online programs should be on how to increase the sense of community. Some researchers like Berry (2017) and Bolliger and Halupa (2012) have been able to demonstrate that instructors impact the sense of community experienced in online courses. Yet, authors like Young and Bruce (2011) have argued that the sense of community in online classes can be promoted by the course design itself. Young and Bruce (2011) state that certain instructional design strategies based on best practices of online education being built into the fabric of the actual courses are one way for potentially promoting a sense of community in online courses. Succinctly put "Instructors who purposefully design learning activities to create opportunities for students to learn about each other, thereby decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence are likely to improve learners' sense of classroom community" (Young and Bruce, 2011, p. 219). According to Da Graca (2016), the online learning

environment itself can contribute to “building community in the online classroom” (p. 2). Scholars like Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, and Hutchings (2008) have argued that doctoral-level students, in particular, desire to be surrounded by what the authors call an “intellectual community” (p. 121). Further, Walker et al. (2008) contend that establishing an intellectual community does not happen by coincidence but requires purposeful design and effort. Seckman (2014) makes a similar point in stating “the evaluation of online methods to foster a sense of community and cognitive engagement is critical to student and programmatic success” (p. 483).

Community of Inquiry

Since an intellectual community does not happen by coincidence, scholars have created tools to help understand community in online courses. Stopa (2017) explains that the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) was developed specifically as a tool to “understand the development of a community in the online course environment” (p. 16). The Community of Inquiry framework was originally developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) based on the assumption that learning occurs in the context of community. More specifically, according to Garrison et al. (2000), a Community of Inquiry is made up of both teachers and students, who are the essential participants in the learning process. The foundational assertion of the Community of Inquiry framework is that learning in an online environment occurs when learners are interacting with three core elements: “cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 88). Figure 1 illustrates how the three core elements overlap to create a valuable educational experience in the context of a Community of Inquiry.

Figure 1 removed for copyright.

Although the three core components of the Community of Inquiry framework are fairly straightforward, briefly explaining each of these elements is valuable for those unfamiliar with the terms.

Social Presence

Garrison et al. (2000) define social presence as “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (p. 89). Social presence can be developed through learner-to-learner interactions as well as instructor-to-learner interactions (Stopa, 2017). Garrison, Anderson, Archer (2010) explain that the social presence as described in the Community of Inquiry framework is not simply to be viewed as an “emotional sense of belonging” (p. 7). Instead, Garrison et al. (2010) make it clear that social presence must be connected to the other two elements of the CoI framework, which are teaching and cognitive presence. The authors state “An important contribution of our work was describing social presence from a multi-dimensional perspective that had overlap with the other presences” (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 7). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) echo this sentiment by stating that

much research has been done on the topic of social presence but “nearly all of this research has been done without considering its relationship to cognitive and teaching presence” (p. 159).

Thus, it becomes clear that social presence must be considered in light of the other major components of the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2010; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Nevertheless, social presence remains one of the essential elements of the CoI framework.

According to Garrison et al. (2000):

When there are affective goals for the educational process, as well as purely cognitive ones, (i.e., where it is important that participants find the interaction in the group enjoyable and personally fulfilling so that they will remain in the cohort of learners for the duration of the program), then social presence is a direct contributor to the success of the educational experience. (p. 89)

While social presence needs to be considered in light of teaching and cognitive presence, it plays an important role in the CoI framework that can lead to the success of the educational experience.

Teaching Presence

Garrison et al. (2000) explain that there are two general functions of teaching presence. These two general functions are the design of the educational experience and facilitation of discourse (Garrison et al., 2000). According to Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), teaching presence is needed in online courses because social and content related interactions by themselves are not sufficient for ensuring effective online learning. Teaching presence helps to provide clearly defined parameters that are focused in a specific direction (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Interestingly, Garrison et al. (2000) note that the general functions of teaching presence can be

performed by any member of the CoI. Nevertheless, in an online course or another educational environment, the functions of teaching presence are most likely to be the responsibility of the instructor of the course (Garrison et al., 2000). Much research has been devoted to explaining the importance of teaching presence in online courses. Thus, it is becoming increasingly clear that teaching presence is essential for effective online learning to occur.

Stopa (2017) says plainly that “teaching presence is critical to the success of the online learning environment” (p. 18). After a decade of studying the CoI framework, Garrison et al. (2010) explain that the main finding concerning teaching presence was that evidence points to the importance of this element of the CoI. Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) found that “The consensus is that teaching presence is a significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community” (p. 163). Yet, Garrison et al. (2000) argue that, although teaching presence is a vital aspect of the CoI, it should be seen as a means to an end. The goal of teaching presence, according to Garrison et al. (2000), should be to “support and enhance social and cognitive presence” (p. 90). Thus, while teaching presence must be considered as an indispensable component of the CoI framework, it cannot be viewed as unrelated to the other two major elements of the CoI.

Cognitive Presence

Though there are three essential components of the CoI framework, one component, in particular, is viewed by scholars as the most important element of the CoI. According to Garrison et al. (2000), cognitive presence, as described in the CoI framework, is most fundamental to academic success in higher education contexts. Cognitive presence is defined as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89).

One of the reasons that cognitive presence is viewed as such an important factor in the CoI framework is that cognitive presence is essential for critical thinking, which is one of the major goals of higher education (Garrison et al., 2000). In fact, Garrison et al. (2010) contend that critical thinking is the “ultimate goal of higher education” (p. 6). Thus, it comes as no surprise that the authors identified cognitive presence as such a significant component of the CoI framework.

To understand cognitive presence, the Practical Inquiry (PI) model was developed (Garrison et al., 2010). The PI model was based on Dewey’s (1933) concept of practical inquiry (Garrison et al., 2010). The PI model was chosen as the starting point for understanding cognitive presence because of its generic structure (Garrison et al., 2000). This structure can be summed up in terms of four stages: “triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 9).

As with the other elements of the CoI framework, researchers should view cognitive presence as being interrelated so that teaching, social, and cognitive presence are supporting one another so that learning may occur (Stopa, 2017). In fact, Archibald (2010) found that social presence and teaching presence play a role in predicting cognitive presence. Studies like the ones completed by Archibald (2010) demonstrate the integrated nature of the CoI framework and the importance of all three presences that define this framework. When discussing cognitive presence, Garrison et al. (2010) remind researchers that the CoI framework requires that all presences interact with one another, which is an important point to keep in mind as individuals study and utilize the CoI framework for future research.

Conclusion

With the state of higher education in a state of change as a result of increasing online course offerings, higher education administrators, course designers, and teachers are looking for ways to enhance online educational experiences (Young & Bruce, 2011). One of the factors that researchers have consistently identified as positively impacting the online experience is community in online courses (Boling et al., 2012; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Young & Bruce, 2011). The Community of Inquiry framework was developed by Garrison et al. (2000) to give researchers insight into community in online courses. The CoI provides a means for understanding the phenomenon of community in online courses and should be consulted by researchers completing studies related to the concept of community in the online classroom.

Related Literature

The Need to Consider Course Design

While promoting and establishing community in the online classroom is ideal, it is not something that occurs merely by happenstance. Authors like Cuthbertson and Falcone (2014) explain that, in order for community to be created or fostered in a “virtual educational space, successful community building activities need to be intentionally cultivated” (p. 217). Young and Bruce (2011) likewise note that creating a strong sense of community does not occur without purposeful effort by the instructor or course designer. Rovai (2002), who authored one of the landmark articles on the concept of community in the online classroom, recognized early on that course design plays a paramount role for promoting a sense community in the online classroom. Rovai (2002) identified course design and pedagogy as being of utmost importance for building and sustaining a sense of community in the online classroom. Lehman and Conceicao (2010) explain that much in the literature in the world of online education focuses on creating engagement amongst students as well as creating a sense of community in online courses. The

common motif that becomes evident as one studies the literature related to sense of community in the online classroom is that community in the online classroom does not happen by accident.

Instead, it requires intentional effort on the part of instructors and or course designers.

Essentially, intentional, pedagogically-sound course design must play a foundational role if instructors and school administrators have any hope of promoting a sense of community in the online classroom.

Course Design

Multiple resources have been written to discuss the importance of course design as well as provide strategies for designing online courses. Individuals who are familiar with the field of online education are well-aware of the vital role that the design of a course plays for providing a high-quality educational experience (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). Diamond (2008) notes that faculty engage in few tasks more significant than designing a course or designing curriculum. One of the core principles of designing quality online courses centers on planning and analysis. Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) explain that a great deal of planning has to occur before an online course can actually be taught. Dick, Carey, and Carey (2005) state that “It has long been accepted that careful analysis work is absolutely critical prior to initiating the design of instruction” (p. 17). Those committed to quality course design engage in what Dick et al. (2005) call “front-end analysis” (p. 17). Essentially, there are certain foundational issues that must be considered when designing courses for an online format. While a host of factors need to be analyzed and considered before an online course is developed, some of the most fundamental issues that instructors need to reflect on in the pre-planning process are knowing the online learner, establishing a philosophy of education, understanding best practices for online education, and creating learning outcomes for online courses.

The Online Learner And Course Design

When considering the implications of course design, it is important for online administrators and faculty to realize what type of person typically takes online courses. In fact, Picciano (2019) asserts that, in the course design process, instead of starting with curriculum or even the delivery method, instructors should first consider the individual needs of the students. More specifically, Picciano (2019) states “In an online course, where most students will participate in the privacy of their homes or offices, designing courses that meet individual needs becomes important” (p. 84). In their book covering the essentials of online course design, Vai and Sosulski (2016) note the importance of meeting the needs of online students through online course design. In fact, the authors contend that the strategies necessary for meeting the needs of online students can be intentionally carried out through deliberate course design (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). If the needs of online students are going to be met by course design, instructors and course designers must know what type of students typically take online courses.

According to Stavredes (2011), there are certain characteristics that online learners typically possess. For instance, in a study of national online learners for the year 2009, only 20% of online learners were 24 years of age or younger (Stavredes, 2011). Stavredes (2011) points out “the online learner is different from the traditional learner, who is usually under the age of 25, single with no children, and attending school full-time while holding a part-time job” (p. 5). Online learners usually have responsibilities that include full-time jobs, spouses, and children (Stavredes, 2011). Del Valle and Duffy (2009) state “These are students who are time restricted by work requirements, cannot afford residential or commuting costs, or are housebound with children, with a disability, or other constraints” (p. 130). Essentially, online learners are a unique type of student that requires a unique type of attention and care from the online faculty member.

In order to effectively teach online learners, it is important for those tasked with instructing students online to adequately understand what type of person is typically enrolled in online courses and programs.

Interestingly, however, the typical characteristics of an online learner are in a state of change. According to Dabbagh (2007), the traditional understanding of the online learner is being challenged with what Dabbagh (2007) calls the “emerging online learner” (p. 219). While the emerging online learner may share some of the same characteristics as the traditional or original online learner, some characteristics of the learner may be quite different than they were when online education first began (Dabbagh, 2007). Stavredes (2011) agrees that the features of the online learner are changing. Now, a wide variety of characteristics and needs make up the online learner population (Stavredes, 2011). Therefore, “it is critical to understand the diversity of online learners in order to develop unique approaches that support learners and facilitate their ability to persist and learn” (Stavredes, 2011, p. 3). It is clear that any higher education institution committed to providing excellent online instruction should be likewise committed to understanding the online learner.

Philosophy of Education

Understanding who is enrolled in online courses is an essential preliminary step to take before designing an online course. However, it is also vitally important for instructors to contemplate and perhaps develop their philosophy of education for teaching online. To this point, Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) contend that thinking through a philosophy of teaching is an essential component for any type of course design. In fact, these authors argue that deciding on a philosophy of teaching is the necessary first step in the planning phase of course design and development (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). Picciano (2019) likewise sees educational

philosophy and theory as fundamental to the design process for online education. Another reason a consistent philosophy of education is important is so that all courses within a given problem are designed with a similar approach (Maddix et al., 2012). According to Thormann and Zimmerman (2012), courses could be created without considering one's philosophy of education but caution against neglecting this step because of the implications to the effectiveness of the online course being developed. Establishing or at least reflecting on one's philosophy of education for online teaching is simply a necessary step that online faculty must take before designing an online course.

The body of knowledge related to the concepts of educational philosophy and learning theory is massive. Thus, many online instructors may wonder where to begin when attempting to solidify their philosophy for online education. Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) suggest that perhaps the best place to start for establishing an online philosophy of education is by examining how a philosophy of education guides instruction in the face-to-face classroom. If one is able to understand how his or her philosophy of education shapes instruction in face-to-face educational contexts, that person may be able to simply alter or modify that philosophy of education for an online educational context (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). Although Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) offer a helpful strategy for establishing a philosophy of education for educators who have already thought through this issue for face-to-face contexts, this approach would be insufficient for faculty who only teach courses online or who are new to the field. Providing a comprehensive philosophy of education for teaching online is beyond the scope of this literature review. However, in an effort to provide some preliminary considerations concerning a philosophy of education online, a couple of major themes in the literature will be highlighted.

According to Picciano (2019), one of the major models that undergirds teaching philosophy for online education is the Community of Inquiry framework. The CoI framework has already been explained in some detail in this paper. However, it is important to note the connection that the CoI framework has with the concepts of both course design and a philosophy of online education. Picciano (2019) says that the CoI model sees online courses and online course design as a means of producing active learning environments, which are online communities. Stein and Wanstreet (2017) explain that the CoI model “reflects the current thinking on how to build and sustain a worthwhile learning experience for online learners” (p. 66). As noted previously, the core assumption of the CoI framework is that learning occurs when students in the given classroom or community are interacting with three essential elements: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

Since each of these three essential elements of a CoI are necessary, it becomes clear how the CoI framework as a core principle of one’s philosophy of education would shape how course design was conducted. For instance, if a faculty member knows that each course should encourage teaching, social, and cognitive presence, the course will be designed with this end in mind. This is why Picciano (2019) says that many courses designed with the CoI model in view are highly interactive. Courses designed using the core principles of the CoI framework often use “discussion boards, blogs, wikis, and videoconferencing” (Picciano, 2019, p. 32). Those educators who have the CoI framework in view may build certain activities into the course that could potentially increase one or more of the presences (Stein & Wanstreet, 2017). In one study, Kumar, Dawson, Cavanaugh and Sessums (2011) applied the CoI framework to an entire professional doctoral program. The application of the CoI framework to the online doctoral program also had implications on course design for courses in the program (Kumar et al., 2011).

As one reflects on the key components of the CoI, it becomes clear how the CoI model could be successfully integrated into one's philosophy of teaching online and how the principles of the CoI model could impact how courses are designed.

Another foundational work that online educators must be familiar with is Benjamin Bloom's *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain* (Bloom, 1956). Although Bloom's taxonomy was originally developed over sixty years ago and some of the naming conventions of the levels now differ from the original version, it remains a foundational educational concept for educators today (Picciano, 2019). It was the concepts of behaviorism that led to the development of taxonomies of learning like the one presented by Bloom (Picciano, 2019). According to Picciano (2019), "behaviorists would study a learning activity repeatedly to deconstruct and determine the elements of learning" (p. 27). After Bloom's taxonomy was established, it has been a useful tool for educators for decades. Halawi, McCarthy, and Pires (2009) state that "Bloom's taxonomy was developed so that researchers could categorize the objectives of the learning system" (p. 374). Yet, the taxonomy developed by Bloom also played an important role helping instructors in assessing student performance in their courses (Halawi et al., 2009).

While the original taxonomy developed by Bloom (1956) has been of great value for educators for decades, scholars have since revised and updated the original taxonomy. Figure 2 is a visual representation of this revised version of Bloom's taxonomy. Figure 2 provides a visual aid which shows that Bloom's revised taxonomy of learning is based on 6 elements: creating, evaluating, analyzing, applying, understanding, and remembering (Picciano, 2019). One of the most obvious differences between the original taxonomy and the revised taxonomy of 2001 is that the original taxonomy used nouns to articulate the main objectives of learning whereas the

revised taxonomy uses verbs and gerunds to label the categories and subcategories (Armstrong, n.d.). The revised taxonomy was published under the title *A Taxonomy for Teaching, Learning, and Assessment* (Armstrong, n.d.).

Figure 2 removed for copyright

On the lowest level of Bloom's taxonomy is remembering. Remembering can be summed up as retrieving or recalling relevant knowledge from memory (Picciano, 2019). Understanding centers on testing the knowledge from the lowest level of the taxonomy (Tulsiani, 2017). Instead of simply retrieving relevant knowledge as with remembering, understanding emphasizes constructing meaning (Picciano, 2019). Applying centers on putting knowledge to use (Tulsiani, 2017). Picciano (2019) defines applying as "carrying out or using a procedure through executing or implementing" (p. 28). As one moves his or her way up the taxonomy, after applying, learners move to the analyzing stage. In this stage, the learner is able to break material into parts and determine how parts relate to one another (Picciano, 2019). Learners who have moved to the

analysis stage have a strong understanding of the subject matter (Tulsiani, 2017). Once learners make it to evaluation, they are “making judgements based on criteria and standards through checking and critiquing” (Picciano, 2019, p. 27). The final stage of Bloom’s taxonomy is the creating stage. Individuals in this stage are creating new and original work based on what they have learned (Tulsiani, 2017). In the creating stage, people are “putting elements together to form a coherent or functioning whole; reorganizing elements into a new pattern or structure through generating, planning or producing (Picciano, 2019, p. 27).

Bloom’s taxonomy is significant for those developing a philosophy of online teaching in a number of ways. First, according to Tulsiani (2017), there are ways that Bloom’s taxonomy can be applied specifically to e-learning environments. Second, there is a clear link between Bloom’s taxonomy and course design. Denny (2019) contends that, if Bloom’s taxonomy is a key aspect of one’s philosophy of education, it is the job of the instructor or designer to help one’s learners move through each stage or step of the taxonomy. Denny (2019) argues that courses can be designed in such a way that progress through each of the stages of the taxonomy is promoted by intentionally incorporating certain tasks into the course design. Essentially, then, the course design should impact the student’s progress through each of the stages. Finally, according to Vai and Sosulski (2016), Bloom’s taxonomy can even be used for writing learning outcomes, which is a vitally important skill for educators to master. After reviewing Bloom’s taxonomy itself as well as some of the implications of the taxonomy for online learning as a whole and online course design in specific, it becomes clear why being familiar with Bloom’s taxonomy is important for all online educators.

Best Practices

Both understanding the online learner and establishing a philosophy of teaching online are two important steps to take before designing an online course. Likewise, instructors must also be aware of best practices for online education prior to actually creating an online course. Numerous resources have been written to discuss the best practices of online education (Reisman, 2003; Maddix, Estep, & Lowe, 2012; King, 2015). According to Vai and Sosulski (2016), the development of best practices and standards for online education as a whole has led to the application of these best practices specifically to course design. Rather than simply designing courses based on emotive feelings about what may be successful, course design can and should be rooted in standards and practices that have been confirmed to work in the online environment (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). While countless best practices of online education have been established, two of these best practices can be most clearly applied to course design: the need to engage the online learner and the need to establish social presence.

Engaging the online learner is considered an integral task for the online educator (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). Put another way, Conrad and Donaldson (2011) explain:

The involvement of the learner in the course, whether one calls it interaction, engagement, or building community, is critical if an online course is to be more than a lecture-oriented course in which the interaction is primarily between the learner and the content or the learner and the instructor. (p. 5)

In another work concerning best practices of online education, Kear (2011) explains that engagement and belonging are essential for the online classroom. According to Kear (2011), when students are engaged in the online course, a student's sense of belonging can actually be increased. According to Phirangee (2016), in many cases, the physical separation of students in

online courses tends to increase feelings of isolation or disconnectedness. Kear (2011) says that fostering or promoting engagement in the online course can help lessen feelings of isolation.

One of the major reasons that educators focus on engaging the online learner is that this stimulates active rather than passive learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). Conrad and Donaldson (2011) contend that, in an online environment, “students cannot be passive knowledge-absorbers who rely on the instructor to feed information to them” (p. 5). Instead, online learners should be “knowledge generators” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011, p. 5). Vai and Sosulski (2016) likewise see the role of the learner as an active one rather than a passive one. Vai and Sosulski (2016) state “Engaged learners are active participants in the learning process” (p. 84). Further, according to Conrad and Donaldson (2011), engaging the online learner has the potential to move students from passive to active learners. Interestingly, Kear (2011) makes a clear connection between engaging the online learner and the development of a sense of community. According to Kear (2011), establishing a sense of community in an online classroom has numerous benefits for online learners. One of the chief benefits of developing a sense of community is that it can cause students to engage more actively in the course (Kear, 2011). It seems that promoting a sense of community in the online classroom and engaging the online learner go hand-in-hand for designing an effective online course.

Having established that engaging the online learner is considered best practice for online education, it becomes necessary to determine how one might go about engaging the online learner through course design. One strategy for engaging the online learner is to deliberately design activities into the course that increase communication and collaboration amongst students (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). According to Vai and Sosulski (2016), “communication and collaboration with others support active, engaged learning and community” (p. 87). Kear (2011)

likewise sees communication as essential for engaging online learners. In fact, Kear (2011) asserts that, as a result of regular communication, students can develop into a community, which is directly related to engagement. The reason for this is that students who are communicating and collaborating together actually know one another and are willing to be more open about their learning (Kear, 2011). Conrad and Donaldson (2011) explain, however, that interaction, collaboration, and communication are not intuitive for many online learners. Thus, instructors and course designers must take deliberate steps to incorporate collaborative learning into online courses.

It is important to note that collaborative learning has been associated with positive course outcomes. According to Saqr, Fors, and Tedre (2018), the benefits of collaborative learning have long been recognized by scholars. The authors state “Collaborative learning facilitates reflection, diversifies understanding and stimulates skills of critical and higher-order thinking” (Saqr et al., p. 1). Research from Laal and Ghodsi (2012) also supports the notion that there are numerous benefits “associated with the concept of collaborative learning” (p. 486). Laal and Ghodsi (2012) explain that the benefits of collaborative learning (CL) are not limited to the academic sphere but also have benefits both socially and psychologically for learners. In sum, Laal and Ghodsi (2012) state “CL compared with competitive and individualistic efforts, has numerous benefits and typically results in higher achievement and greater productivity, more caring, supportive, and committed relationships; and greater psychological health, social competence, and self esteem” (p. 489). Based on the numerous benefits associated with collaborative learning, it is of much value to identify strategies for engaging the online learner through collaborative learning activities.

Though an exhaustive list of strategies for engaging the online learner through collaborative learning activities is beyond the scope of this paper, three strategies will be noted. One way that collaborative learning can be promoted in the online classroom is to require a student to work as a member of a team (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). Working as a team promotes collaboration and also demonstrates the reality of a real-world scenario that may require individuals to work as part of a team (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). A second strategy would be to design learning activities that require students to communicate with their peers in the online format. As noted previously, Kear (2011) argues that regular communication between learners and learners as well as learners and their teacher can increase sense of belonging, which positively contributes to the sense of community experienced by the online learners and the engagement of online learners. Therefore, a straightforward strategy for increasing or promoting engagement through course design would be to design activities into the course that require students to communicate with one another. This could be done in a variety of ways including but not limited to discussion forums, group projects, and wiki pages. One additional strategy for increasing communication and collaboration would be requiring students to get to know their classmates outside of the online classroom. For example, students could be required to call at least one other student over the course of the term in order to simply build a relationship with that classmate. One benefit of each of these strategies is that they could seamlessly be integrated into the online course. The course could be designed in such a way that students pair up with a classmate to complete a graded group assignment, class discussions could be added as a course requirement, and the requirement to call another student could be connected to a graded class discussion, quiz, or paper. Instead of adding additional requirements for students to complete,

collaborative learning strategies could be integrated directly into the course, which would perhaps promote natural and organic course collaboration among students.

Engaging the online learner is a widely accepted best practice for online education (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Kear, 2011; Vai & Sosulski, 2016). Engaging the online learner has multiple benefits in the online classroom and should be the goal of every online educator. Deliberate steps can and should be taken by instructors and course designers to promote engagement in the online classroom. One of the most straightforward ways to engage the online learner is by increasing collaboration and communication. Although engaging the online learner is a vital best practice to consider when designing online course, another related best practice for online education must also be contemplated as instructors design online courses: establishing social presence.

As has already been discussed, social presence is one of the major components of the CoI framework presented by Garrison et al. (2000). Garrison et al. (2000) consider social presence to be essential for promoting community in the online classroom. Lehman and Conceicao (2010) state that “There is no question that creating a sense of presence in the online environment is critical” (p. 11). According to Lehman and Conceicao (2010), social presence, in specific, involves a personal and emotional connection to the class or community. People are social beings by nature and online courses provide a space where social presence can be experienced (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). It is absolutely essential that instructors and course designers incorporate elements into online courses that promote social presence amongst online learners. Because the online or virtual space differs from the physical space, the way presence is experienced also varies (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). Thus, when reflecting on the implications

of social presence for online course design, researchers should become familiar with how social presence is cultivated in the online classroom.

In the most basic terms, in an online community, “social presence is increased by communicating in ways which are perceived as ‘warm’ or ‘sociable’, and which therefore compensate for the lack of richness of the medium” (Kear, 2011, p. 19). Maddix et al. (2012) indicate that many instructors utilize threaded discussion forums with the goal of fostering social presence between the members of the online community. Other researchers suggest using some type of ice-breaker activity that helps students become familiar with their classmates as well as the instructor for the course (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). Promoting social presence for the purpose of building community can also be carried out by pairing students off and asking them to interview one another (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). The ways in which social presence can be promoted in the online classroom are many. Instructors and course designers need to be aware of the necessity of promoting social presence in the online classroom and reflect on how intentional approaches to encouraging social presence can be incorporated into the online classroom.

After one reviews some of the best practices for online education, it is evident why these best practices must be considered before developing an online course. The most apparent takeaway from the literature related to the best practices of online education is that course design should rest on the foundation of best practices. Two of the most pertinent best practices for online education are the need to engage the online learner and the need to develop social presence in the online classroom. Instructors should take the steps necessary to ensure that every course he or she develops incorporates these two best practices. Though best practices are one of the essential foundations of good online course design, instructors must also consider learning outcomes as they seek to create high quality online courses.

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes are an essential component for any quality online course. Vai and Sosulski (2016) argue that learning outcomes are useful for defining the shape of an online learning module. Thormann and Zimmerman (2012) state that “establishing goals, objectives, and outcomes is part of giving clear directions and communicating expectations in any learning environment” (p. 11). Maddix et al. (2012) note that critical to the development of an online course is the creation of “clearly defined course goals and learning objectives articulating what students will be able to do by the end of the course” (p. 166). It simply goes against best practice to attempt to create an online course without having clearly defined learning outcomes. In a sense, it is best to begin with the end in mind when designing an online course.

Quality learning outcomes drive the content in each learning module (Vai & Sosulski, 2016). Outcomes represent what behavior is desired or expected of the learner at the end of a given learning process (Thormann & Zimmerman, 2012). They should be framed using measurable action verbs (Maddix et al., 2012). Interestingly, quality learning outcomes aim to get learners to the higher stages of Bloom’s taxonomy, which further support the notion that a philosophy of online teaching is essential for educators interested in designing courses for the online format (Maddix et al., 2012). Learning outcomes are vitally important components for online courses. Learning outcomes must be deliberately designed and content must be created in such a way that learning outcomes are met (Vai & Sosulski, 2016).

Course design, as a whole, cannot be neglected by educators seeking to provide high-quality online courses. For educators, virtually no task is more important than the design of one’s course (Diamond, 2008). Before the actual development of courses can be complete, instructors must first complete the pre-planning process. Pre-planning for the design of online courses must

include but not be limited to knowing the online learner, establishing a philosophy of education, understanding best practices for online education, and creating learning outcomes for online courses.

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

The importance of community in the online classroom has been well-established for some time (Boling et al., 2012; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009; Young & Bruce, 2011). A sense of community in the online classroom is ideal (Rovai & Baker, 2004). While many educators recognize the essential nature of community in the online classroom, more research could be done to determine how to promote community in the online classroom. Young and Bruce (2011) have argued that the sense of community in online classes can be promoted by the course design itself. Young and Bruce (2011) state that certain instructional design strategies based on best practices of online education being built into the fabric of the actual courses are one way for potentially promoting a sense of community in online courses. Simply put “Instructors who purposefully design learning activities to create opportunities for students to learn about each other, thereby decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence are likely to improve learners’ sense of classroom community” (Young and Bruce, 2011, p.219). Using Young and Bruce’s (2011) comments as a starting point, a study that explores how students describe the sense of community in their online courses after certain elements of a given doctoral course were changed would be of great value. The study could potentially show a link between course design and the sense of community experienced by online learners.

While studies have been completed that look at community in the online classroom, according to Young and Bruce (2011) studies are still needed to determine what course design elements may positively impact the sense of community experienced in online courses. “Future

studies need to focus on how to prepare instructors to offer relevant learning experiences that bring together students in a community to collaborate, socialize, and interact” (Young & Bruce, 2011, p. 219). This study will aim to prepare instructors with the knowledge necessary to design courses in a way that promotes community.

Profile of the Current Study

As a result of the rapid growth of online education, online educators, administrators, and instructors are searching for ways to increase the effectiveness of their online courses and programs. The literature related to online education reveals that community in the online classroom is one of the most important factors to consider when designing online courses and programs. Community in the online classroom is one of the major goals of many educators because of its link to positive outcomes for students. Further, the concept of community itself finds its basis in Scripture. Thus, studying the perceived sense of community of doctoral-level students in online theological courses would be of great value for any researcher interested in discovering ways to more effectively carry out the biblically-mandated task of Christian education.

This researcher is proposing to study the perceived sense of community experience in online doctoral courses by utilizing a qualitative, phenomenological design. The researcher is seeking to interview students in an online Doctor of Ministry course offered through the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. The researcher wants to determine how online Doctor of Ministry students describe the sense of community they experienced while taking EVCP 810, DSMN 810, and LEAD 810. Then, this researcher wants to determine how online Doctor of Ministry students describe the sense of community in DMIN 810 after certain deliberate instructional design changes were made to the DMIN 810 course that required

increased social interaction amongst students in the class. The specific research procedures and methodology is outline in detail in Chapter Three of this dissertation.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The third chapter of this doctoral dissertation provides a detailed explanation of the research methodology that will be utilized to complete this study. In this chapter, attention will be given to explaining the research problem, purpose statement, and questions. Further, an overview of the specific methodology to be utilized in this study will also be provided, which includes describing the research population, sample, and setting. The role of the researcher and ethical considerations will also be expounded upon. Finally, this chapter will outline how data will be collected for this study as well as how the data for the study will be analyzed.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Online education as a whole is growing (Allen & Seaman, 2017). It should come as no surprise then that Christian higher education institutions are also embracing online education (Cartwright, Etzel, Jackson, & Jones, 2017). With online Christian education on the rise, it is becoming increasingly important for Christian online higher education institutions to not simply embrace online learning but ensure that the courses and programs being offered are effectively educating online students. An important consideration concerning effective online education centers on the concept of community in the online classroom. Many researchers have argued that community in the online classroom is ideal and should be a priority for online educators (Rovai & Baker, 2004; Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017; Lowe-Madkins, 2016). Studies have been completed that suggest that a strong sense of community in the online classroom is linked to an increase in program persistence, an increase in retention, and can even have the effect of reversing feelings of isolation (Rovai & Baker, 2004). Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009) state that promoting a sense of community in the online classroom is related to numerous

positive benefits in the online classroom. Simply put, according to Rovai and Baker (2004), community in the online classroom is “positively related to several desired school outcomes” (p. 473). Seckman (2014) asserts that attention to learning online methods that impact a sense of community in the online classroom is essential for both student and programmatic success.

Since it is becoming widely established that fostering a sense of community in the online classroom is ideal, determining how students in online courses describe the sense of community in their online courses would be of great value. According to Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly, and Killion (2009), “Although the general consensus was that sense of community is desirable, achievable and can be structured, a number of questions and unexplored nuances remain” (p. 143). It seems of great importance to determine ways in which faculty and course designers could potentially promote a sense of community in online classes. Young and Bruce (2011) argue that instructional design strategies that ask students to learn more about each other on a personal basis could potentially increase the sense of community experienced in the online classroom. This study will explore how instructional design strategies may impact how online doctoral students describe the sense of community experienced in their online courses. More specifically, this study will explore how online doctoral level students describe the sense of community in three introductory online classes that Doctor of Ministry students completed which were not designed with the goal of increasing social interaction among peers. Additionally, this study will explore how online doctoral students describe the sense of community in a single Doctor of Ministry course after certain course requirements had been added to the course that requires students to get to know one another on a personal level.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe sense of community

experienced by online Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in introductory doctoral courses which were not designed with the goal of community in mind. These courses were DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810. Additionally, this study will seek to describe the sense of community experienced by Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in an online course that was deliberately designed to require increased personal interaction amongst peers. This course is DMIN 810.

Research Questions

The following Research Questions will guide this study:

RQ1. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses *before* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ2. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course *after* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ3. What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?

RQ4. Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?

Research Design and Methodology

The proposed study will be conducted using qualitative research methods. According to Creswell (2014), “qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the

meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). Marshall and Rossman (2006) assert that a major feature of qualitative research is that it is “grounded in the lived experiences of people” (p. 2). Another significant feature of a qualitative research is that this approach is driven by a desire to explain certain real-world events or experiences through existing or emerging concepts (Yin, 2011). As the definition and major features of qualitative research are made clear, the value of using this approach of research for this proposed study should also become clear. A major feature of the proposed study is to determine the experience online doctoral students have in their online doctoral courses. Essentially, this study would be looking intently at the lived experiences of online Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University. Further, other studies have widely established that community in the online classroom is an important component for academic achievement in online classrooms. Yet, the nuance that remains unexplored is precisely what changes need to be made in order to foster a sense of community in online courses. Thus, by using a qualitative approach to research to help understand how students explain their experience with community in online classes, strategies for promoting a sense of community in online courses could become more clear.

As is the case with other approaches to research, though, there are a number of specific designs that can be utilized to complete a qualitative study. This study will utilize a phenomenological research design, which is one of five major qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2014). Creswell (2014) explains that phenomenological researchers “describe the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 14). Phenomenological studies attempt to provide a clear and faithful account of the lived experiences of participants as described using the participants’ own words (Yin, 2011). Therefore, the most common means of collecting data for a phenomenological study is

conducting interviews (Creswell, 2014). Marshall and Rossman (2006) refer to this type of interview specifically as phenomenological interviews. Phenomenological interviewing looks at the lived experiences of individuals, which is a major feature of qualitative research in general. However, one unique feature of phenomenological interviewing is that “the purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept of phenomenon that several individuals share” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 104). Phenomenology was chosen for this study because of this design’s focus on looking at the lived experiences described by the participants themselves. Further, this researcher hopes to gain insight into how all the students in the class describe the phenomenon of sense of community.

Before this study began, students in the Doctor of Ministry Program at Liberty University could select a number of introductory courses as their first course in the program. Three of these introductory course options were LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810. Based on the cognate the student was enrolled in, the student had a variety of options for his or her first course. These courses were not deliberately designed with the goal of fostering a sense of community or increasing social interaction among peers. In Fall 2018, the program requirements for the Doctor of Ministry program were altered. Every student in the Doctor of Ministry program on the new Degree Completion Plan at Liberty University was required to take DMIN 810, Foundations for the Doctor of Ministry. The program director deliberately added certain course requirements to the course that increased social interactions between students in the class. The course was intentionally designed to promote an enhanced sense of community in the course. The added course requirements do not ask students to interact with course material or concepts. Rather, they are specifically designed to increase social interaction between students, which Young and Bruce (2011) suggest could improve a learner’s sense of

community in the online classroom. This study will seek to determine how students describe the sense of community in DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810, which were introductory courses that Doctor of Ministry students could take prior to Fall 2018. These courses were not designed in such a way that social interaction was intentionally fostered with the goal of promoting a sense of community in the class. Further, this study will seek to determine how students describe the sense of community in DMIN 810 after deliberate course design changes have been implemented. As noted above, according to Marshall and Rossman (2006), the goal of phenomenological interviewing is “to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share” (p. 104). Thus, this researcher will conduct in-depth interviews of the participants with this goal in mind.

Setting

The setting of this study will be online Doctor of Ministry classrooms offered through Liberty University Online. Liberty University is an industry-leader in online education. Further, the Doctor of Ministry Program offered through the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity is of the largest Doctor of Ministry programs in the county. The Doctor of Ministry program is led by a program director and the courses are taught by a combination of adjunct and full-time faculty. As it relates to organizational structure, the D. Min. program falls under the umbrella of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, which is led by an Online Dean, an Associate Dean, two Online Chairs, and a number of administrative staff.

The specific setting for this study will be DMIN 810, DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810. As noted previously, DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810 were introductory course options for students prior to Fall 2018. In Fall 2018, the Doctor of Ministry Program was essentially redesigned. The Doctor of Ministry program director sought to provide a solid

foundation in the introductory Doctor of Ministry course that required student-to-student interaction that would hopefully also increase the sense of community experienced by Doctor of Ministry students. DMIN 810 was designed by a Subject Matter Expert who oversees course quality and design. One major emphasis of the course design was to add elements to the course that require students in the class to interact with one another as part of a graded assignment in the course. Since releasing these changes to the course, the program director for the Doctor of Ministry has noticed an increase in social interaction in collaborative assignments in the course that are beyond what is required of students. However, no study has been conducted to determine how students describe these assignments or the experience with the course as a whole after the design of the course was altered.

Participants

Research Population

The population of this study will consist of all Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University who have taken DMIN 810, LEAD 810, DSMN 810, and EVCP 810.

Research Sample(s) and Sampling Technique

Selecting the specific sample as well as the number of units or participants to be included in the study is an important choice to be made by the qualitative researcher (Yin, 2011). In general, qualitative research tends to use purposive sampling (Yin, 2011). Yin (2011) defines purposive sampling as sampling with “the goal or purpose for selecting the specific study units is to have those that will yield the most relevant and plentiful data, given your topic of study” (p. 88). The research sample for this study will consist of all students from a single section of DMIN 810 that completed this course in Fall of 2018. The sample will also consist of all students from a single section of DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810 that completed the

course in Fall 2017. Enrollment for a single full section of these courses varies. However, the number of students enrolled in a single full section of the class is approximately 10. Each student in the selected sections of DMIN 810, DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810 will have the opportunity to participate in the study. This particular sample and course were purposively selected because DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810 were introductory courses offered prior to the creation of DMIN 810 that were not designed with the goal of community in mind. DMIN 810 was selected because this course had alterations made that requires students to interact with their peers on personal level. Thus, this sample will yield the most relevant data to the topic being studied in this doctoral dissertation.

While enrollment in these courses varies from term-to-term, the number of students enrolled in a single full section of the class is approximately 10. Creswell (2014) explains that there is not necessarily a rule or standard on the number of participants that should be involved in a qualitative study but the author says the number is often dependent on the type of design being utilized. Creswell (2014) indicates that, for a phenomenological study, the sample size should range from approximately 3 to 10 participants. Therefore, this researcher will seek to have at least this number of participants in the study. Each student in the selected section of DMIN 810 will have the opportunity to participate in the study.

Role of the Researcher

This researcher's role in the research will entail conducting interviews of the participants in the study, compiling the data that comes as a result of the interviews, and explaining the findings of the study. This researcher is an employee and adjunct faculty member of the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. Yet, this researcher's job responsibilities both as a staff member and as an adjunct faculty member are not directly associated with the Doctor of Ministry

Program. This researcher's staff and faculty responsibilities are primarily related to undergraduate level courses and faculty. In fact, the Doctor of Ministry Program has a different staff member devoted to the needs of the program. Thus, this author sees no issue with accurately collecting, analyzing, and reporting the data that is gathered in this study regardless of what results the data may yield. While this researcher holds the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity in high regard and is a proponent of online education as a way accomplishing the task of Christian education, he is unsure what the findings of this research will be. Though the literature related to online education indicates that community can be fostered and experienced in online classroom, this researcher has found experiencing community in online courses to be difficult. Perhaps this researcher's main bias as it relates to this study is that he hopes that the findings of the study demonstrate that online Doctor of Ministry students report an increased sense of community in their courses as a result of being required to intentionally interact with their peers.

Ethical Considerations

When dealing with human participants, researchers must always anticipate and give attention to any ethical issues that may arise. According to Creswell (2014), ethical issues today command more attention than ever. Ethical issues apply to quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014). More specifically, any study that deals with human participants must receive prior approval from an Institutional Review Board (Yin, 2011). Therefore, for this study, this researcher will be seeking approval from the Institutional Review Board at Liberty University. This researcher will not be interviewing participants from a population that is considered especially vulnerable "such as minors (under the age of 19), mentally incompetent participants, victims, persons with neurological impairments, pregnant women or fetuses, prisoners, and individuals with AIDS" (Leedy &

Ormond, 2016, p. 91). Thus, the risk to the participants in this study is seemingly minimal. Based on the nature of the interviews that will be conducted and the topic of the study itself, the risks in the study do not appear “appreciably greater than the normal risks of day-to-day living” (Leedy & Ormond, 2016, p. 102).

Because this research will use human participants, though, the study does require informed consent (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). Creswell (2014) indicates that it is essentially standard to have participants sign an informed consent form before participating in a study. Thus, this researcher will have participants sign an informed consent form before they provide any personal or confidential data. Both Leedy and Ormond (2016) and Creswell (2014) provide a list of elements that could be included in an informed consent form. This researcher will adapt the informed consent form for this proposed study based on the suggestions offered by Leedy and Ormond (2016) and Creswell (2014). At the minimum, the informed consent form utilized in this study will contain the “standard set of elements that acknowledges protection of human rights” (Creswell, 2014, p. 96). Further, the informed consent form will clearly indicate that participation in the study is voluntary and one can stop participating at any time.

For this proposed study, the greatest risk would likely be the potential of a violation of confidentiality. To be clear, a participants’ right to privacy must be of utmost concern for researchers who are given access to participants’ private information (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). Mertens (2012) explains that “researchers are obligated to promise confidentiality to participants in a study; this means the data will be reported in such a way that they cannot be associated with a particular individual” (p. 36). Therefore, this researcher will place a high emphasis on ensuring any information that would associate data with a particular participant. To ensure confidentiality, this research will take three steps suggested by Leedy and Ormond (2016). First, this researcher

will assign pseudonyms to participants in the study. Since the data collection in this qualitative study relies on interviewing, when reporting how participants responded in the interviews, this researcher will use pseudonyms instead of participants' actual names. Second, this researcher will eliminate any details from the interview data that could potentially compromise the identity of the participant being interviewed. Finally, this researcher will refrain from posting any easily decodable data online.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Collection Methods

As briefly noted in the ethical considerations section, this phenomenological study will rely on interviews to collect data. Yet, before establishing specifically how data will be conducted in this study, it is helpful to first review how data is conducted in phenomenological studies in general. Several researchers point out that phenomenological research designs typically gather data by conducting interviews (Creswell, 2018; Leedy & Ormond, 2016; Yin, 2011). Marshall and Rossman (2006) contend that phenomenological interviewing, in particular, has the purpose of “describing the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share” (p. 104). According to Leedy & Ormond (2016), phenomenological interviews are typically lengthy, lasting between 1-2 hours. Marshall and Rossman (2006) likewise note that the interviews utilized in a phenomenological study are often “labor intensive” for the researcher (p. 105). Thus, any researcher conducting a phenomenological study should be prepared to conduct in-depth, detailed interviews of his or her participants in order to discover how the participants describe their experience with the phenomenon at hand.

In terms of interview structure, Leedy and Ormond (2016) indicate that the interviews are actually “relatively unstructured” (p. 255). Researchers conducting a phenomenological

interview will include listening to the descriptions of the participants' experiences with the phenomenon while constantly listening for subtle cues that may provide insight into a participant's experience with the phenomenon (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). Both Leedy and Ormond (2016) and Yin (2011) note that, when interviewing participants for a phenomenological study, the researcher should utilize an informal, conversational approach. This informal approach can create opportunities for two-way interactions between the participants and the researcher (Yin, 2011). In general terms, though, the conversation is mostly furthered by the participant while the researcher mostly listens (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). As is the case with general qualitative interviews, phenomenological interviews should try to use open-ended rather than closed-ended question in an effort to ensure participants answers questions in their own words (Yin, 2011). According to Yin (2011), researchers would not want participants to use words predefined by the researcher to describe their experience. Thus, there must be a deliberate emphasis on using open-ended questions to ensure responses from participants are not limited (Yin, 2011).

Instruments and Protocol

Having reviewed some of the major characteristics of interviews for a phenomenological design, the general interview procedures that this researcher will employ can be articulated. First, this researcher plans to conduct lengthy interviews with the participants of this study that will likely last 1-2 hours each. The expected sample size for this study is approximately 10. Thus, this researcher could interview up to 10 participants for 1-2 hours per interview. Since all of the participants will be online students, these interviews will be conducted using Microsoft Teams or another video conferencing software that is accessible to the participants of the study. Second, as suggested by Leedy and Ormond (2016), this researcher plans to leave the interviews themselves

relatively unstructured. This researcher will ask questions related to the concept of community in the online classroom as well as questions about the social interaction amongst peers in DMIN 810, EVCP 810, LEAD 810, and DSMN 810. However, the interviews will not follow a rigid structure and a set questionnaire will not be used. Third, the questions that are asked to the participants in the study will be open-ended in nature so as to allow the participants to describe their experience with the phenomenon in their own words. Fourth, throughout the interview process, this writer will keep an informal, conversational tone as he engages with the participants. Hopefully, this conversational tone will encourage participants to be open in terms of their experience in the introductory course as it relates to the concept of community in the online classroom. According to Yin (2011), one of the chief goals of qualitative research centers on “depicting a complex social world from a participant’s perspective” (p. 135). Thus, this researcher will keep in mind that it is the words of participants that should guide the interview process and not necessarily the questions or prompts provided by the researcher.

While an interview questionnaire will not be utilized, this researcher will develop and utilize what Yin (2011) calls an interview protocol. According to Yin (2011), “The interview protocol usually contains a small subset of topics—those that are considered relevant to a given interview” (p. 139). Yet, the interview protocol should not be equated to an interview questionnaire (Yin, 2011). Further, the interview protocol represents a mental framework of what should be covered within the interview but does not consist of a list of questions that the researcher will ask the participant (Yin, 2011). Based on the criteria articulated by Yin (2011), this interview protocol for the proposed study will focus on concepts related to the concept of community in the online classroom, the interaction between students in the online classroom, and the experience of community in the online classroom as it relates to the overall experience in the

course. The interview protocol will also emphasize the concept of course design as it relates to the students' experience in the classroom. In general, the broad concepts to be addressed in the interview protocol will be community in the online classroom, course design, and social interaction between peers. Yin (2011) says that the purpose of the interview protocol is to produce a guided conversation. Therefore, rather than designing the interview protocol as a rigid set of questions to ask each participant, this researcher will utilize the interview protocol as a tool to be used to loosely guide interviews with the participants of the study to ensure the major concepts of the study are covered in each interview.

Showing how data will be collected in a given study is of utmost importance for the researcher. However, before one can ascertain how data will be analyzed, he or she must first explain how data will be recorded. According to Creswell (2018), in a qualitative study, there are typically a few options for recording data. Creswell (2018) says that some options for recording data include videotaping the interviews, audiotaping interviews, or taking handwritten notes. This researcher plans to capitalize on all of the suggestions outlined by Creswell (2018). As noted previously, the interviews for this study will be conducted using Microsoft Teams. When using the video conferencing feature of Teams, there is an option to record the meeting. Therefore, for each interview, this researcher will record the interviews with the participants. This will not require additional work or setup on the part of the researcher. Instead, the researcher can simply click to record the meeting and then give his undivided attention to the participant being interviewed. Thus, while the meeting is being recorded, this writer will also be taking copious handwritten notes. Yin (2011) cautions that, when taking notes, capturing and recording everything is not possible. The focus in this researcher's notetaking will be on "recording what you need without disrupting a participant's rhythm or pace" (Yin, 2011, p. 156).

This writer plans to focus on taking notes verbatim on those topics directly related to the study. Having determined the specific manner in which interviews will be conducted in this phenomenological study as well as how data will be recorded for the study, the overall research procedures will be outlined below.

Procedures

In order to collect the data for the proposed study, a number of steps will have to be taken by this researcher. First, the author must obtain IRB approval in order to move forward with the study. This study deals with human participants. Therefore, IRB approval is a requirement for this study. Second, the researcher will need to obtain permission from the Program Director of the Doctor of Ministry program in order to interview students in the program. At this time, the Program Director has already agreed to allow this researcher to interview students in the D. Min. program. Further, the Online Dean of the John. W. Rawlings School of Divinity has also given permission to this researcher to contact and interview School of Divinity students. Third, the researcher will work with the Doctor of Ministry Program Director to determine which specific sections of DMIN 810, EVCP 810, DSMN 810, and LEAD 810 will be utilized for the study, as multiple sections of these courses can be offered each sub-term. Fourth, after IRB approval has been granted and the section of the course to be utilized for the study is determined, this researcher can begin making outreaches to students regarding the opportunity to participate in the study and providing informed consent forms to those who choose to participate. As noted previously, the invitation to participate in the study will be provided to all students in a single section of DMIN 810, DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810 in a given sub-term. For the students who choose to participate, informed consent forms will be disseminated to the students and then signed by the students. Fifth, once informed consent forms are signed, the researcher

can begin collecting data using the data collection methods outlined above. Sixth, as interviews are conducted, the researcher will safeguard all interview material by keeping all handwritten notes locked in a drawer and all interviews saved on a password-protected computer. In the final report, names will be changed so that identities of participants are not revealed.

Data Analysis

Analysis Method

According to Leedy and Ormond (2016), qualitative research, by its nature, is somewhat flexible and can change from project to project. Thus, providing a precise manner in which data must be analyzed in a phenomenological study can be difficult. Nevertheless, there are some themes and principles that guide researchers concerning how to best analyze the data that has been collected in a phenomenological study. For instance, Leedy and Ormond (2016) note that, in the analysis stage of a phenomenological study, the task of the researcher is to “search for meaningful concepts that reflect various aspects of the experience” (p. 258). Yin (2011) says that the data analysis in a phenomenological study centers on interpreting the words of the participants as they relate to the phenomenon that has been experienced by all the participants. As meaningful concepts surface by studying the words of the participants, the researcher attempts to “integrate those concepts into a seemingly typical experience” (Leedy & Ormond, 2016, p. 258). In terms of specific strategies for analyzing the data in a phenomenological design, Yin (2011) suggests comparing the words of the participants’ side-by-side with the researcher’s interpretations. According to Creswell (2018), “Interpretation in qualitative research involves several procedures: summarizing the overall findings, comparing the findings to the literature, discussing a personal view of the findings, and stating limitations and future research” (p. 198). In terms of analyzing data, this researcher will rely on the suggestions offered by Leedy and Ormond (2016), Yin (2011) and Creswell (2018) to determine what steps will be taken in

this phase of the research process. Yet, in general, the data analysis will include elements of studying the words of participants, comparing the words of the participants to this researcher's interpretations, summarizing the findings of the study, comparing the findings to what is stated in the literature.

However, before the researcher can begin the actual analysis of the data, a number of important steps must first be taken. The analysis stage of the research in a qualitative, phenomenological study begins with compiling the data (Yin, 2011). Creswell (2018) says that compiling the data also includes organizing and preparing the data for the analysis. This study will rely heavily on handwritten notes taken in in-depth interviews. As a result of these interviews, this researcher will likely have several pages of handwritten notes. Yin (2011) explains that these notes must be arranged and put to some kind of order. Once the notes have been compiled, the researcher will have his working database for the study (Yin, 2011). After this, the researcher must read or look at all the data (Creswell, 2018). This step is meant to give the researcher an overarching sense of the data as well as its potential meaning.

The next phases or steps in the data analysis process are particularly important and careful attention must be paid to how these phases are accomplished. Having compiled and read through all of the data, the researcher must next focus on "taking apart the data and putting it back together" (Creswell, 2018, p. 190). Yin (2011) calls these next two phases of data analysis disassembling and reassembling. According to Yin (2011), it is in these two phases that the researcher must do what scholars call "coding" the data. Creswell (2018) explains that coding qualitative data involves "taking text data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term, often based in the actual language of the participant (called an *in vivo* term)" (p. 193). In coding

qualitative data, the researcher must break down the data that has been compiled into smaller fragments (Yin, 2011). These smaller fragments consist of categories of data that are represented by using a specific term (Creswell, 2018). The data from this proposed study will be a compilation of handwritten notes gathered in the interview phase. Thus, the data for this study will be coded by assigning new labels to the fragments of the data that was compiled in the first phase of the data analysis.

In terms of specific coding procedures, the researcher has an important decision to make. According to Creswell (2018), there are essentially two ways to approach coding in a qualitative study. The researcher can either code by hand or utilize qualitative computer software for assistance in coding the data (Creswell, 2018). Creswell (2018) explains that, even with data from a small number of participants, hand coding is extremely time-consuming and laborious. Thus, using software programs for assistance in the coding process is becoming increasingly popular for qualitative researchers (Creswell, 2018). The general benefit of using a qualitative software program to code qualitative data “is that using the computer is an efficient means for storing and locating qualitative data” (p. 192). Researchers must still spend time going through the data line-by-line but, when using a qualitative computer software, the process is more efficient (Creswell, 2018). Creswell (2018) asserts that using a qualitative computer software for coding data is quite simply the logical choice for individuals conducting a qualitative study. Therefore, as is essentially standard for qualitative research, this writer plans to use a qualitative computer software program to assist in the data coding process. It is this researcher’s understanding that the qualitative researcher software NVivo is available to students, faculty, and staff at Liberty University at no cost. Since NVivo is one of the recommended qualitative research software programs noted by Creswell (2018) and Yin (2011) as potential software

programs and it is easily accessible to this writer, NVivo will be used in the data coding process for this proposed study. After the data has been carefully coded, this researcher can begin the actual analysis and interpretation of data by adhering to the principles outlined by Leedy and Ormond (2016), Yin (2011), and Creswell (2018) outlined above.

For this particular study, it will be important to compare the answers of the participants in DSMN 810, EVCP 810, and LEAD 810 to the answers of the students in DMIN 810. The researcher will seek to discern if there is a significant difference between the answers of the students in the three introductory courses that were available as options prior to the creation of DMIN 810 and the answers of the students who were required to complete DMIN 810. This researcher will be looking for certain patterns that emerge in the descriptions of the concept of community offered by the participants in this study.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, the term validity is usually not used by researchers to describe their studies. Instead, in qualitative research, terms like “quality, credibility, and trustworthiness” are used to describe qualitative studies (Leedy & Ormond, 2016, p. 87). It should come as no surprise that a qualitative study is not naturally trustworthy or credible simply by following qualitative research protocols. Instead, researchers must employ deliberate strategies to ensure their study is trustworthy. To this point, Yin (2011) explains that trustworthiness must be deliberately built into qualitative studies. While several specific strategies for building trustworthiness into this proposed study could be noted, this section will focus on noting three specific strategies that that will be employed during this study to ensure a high degree of trustworthiness.

First, this researcher will conduct his study in a manner that is “transparent” (Yin, 2011). This essentially means that the study will be conducted in such a way that other researchers and readers can review the research procedures and understand them (Yin, 2011). The procedures for this particular study have been laid out in detail throughout this chapter and the findings of this study will likewise be explained in great detail in a later chapter. In order to be transparent, this researcher will ensure all data is available for inspection by other researchers and readers (Yin, 2011). Second, to promote credibility and trustworthiness in this qualitative, phenomenological study, this researcher will adhere strictly to the evidence gathered in the study (Yin, 2011). Because this is a phenomenological study, the primary evidence for this study will be the participants’ own words. Yin (2011) says that “In these situations, the language is valued as the representation of reality” (p. 20). Using this evidence, this researcher will employ a third strategy for promoting trustworthiness in the study: providing a thick description of the data (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). Leedy and Ormond (2016) explain that “A researcher who uses thick description describes a situation in sufficiently rich, ‘thick’ detail that reader can draw their own conclusions from the data presented” (p. 87). Although this study will provide an analysis and interpretation of the data that is collected for this study, the researcher’s goal will be to provide such a detailed and thorough account of the data gathered in the study that readers will draw their own conclusions. The hope in providing a thick description is to ensure that the researcher’s interpretations of the data are not clouding the findings of the study. If data is described in enough detail, readers should be able to draw their own conclusions about the data rather than having to rely entirely on the conclusions offered by the researcher (Leedy & Ormond, 2016). Employing these three specific strategies concerning research procedures and the presentation of the data for this study will help to ensure a trustworthy qualitative study.

While explaining the importance of trustworthiness as well as outlining general strategies for promoting trustworthiness in this study is of value, explaining how specific aspects of trustworthiness will be addressed in the study is of even greater value. In general, there are three basic sub-topics of trustworthiness in a qualitative study: credibility, dependability, and transferability. In a qualitative study, it is important that the researcher account for each of these three sub-topics in the design phase of the research.

Credibility

A key component to showing the trustworthiness or validity of a qualitative study rests on demonstrating that the study is credible. This is why, according to Leedy and Ormond (2016) the credibility of the study must be addressed in the planning stage of the study. One mistake to be avoided concerning the credibility of one's study is to "minimize alternative explanations for the results obtained" (Leedy & Ormond, 2016, p. 88). Therefore, as this researcher analyzes and reports on the data that is obtained throughout this proposed study, he will be careful to include explanations for the results that are not related to the course design of DMIN 810, including factors that could have influenced the results that were unrelated to the study or the topic at hand. Providing alternative explanations for the data will help demonstrate that this researcher is committed to conducting a trustworthy and credible study. This practice will ultimately enhance the overall internal validity of the study (Leedy & Ormond, 2016).

Dependability

An additional consideration related to the trustworthiness of a given study is the dependability of the study. According to Mertens (2012), "dependability parallels reliability, which means that there is consistency in the measurement of the targeted variables" (p. 29). To foster dependability in a qualitative study, the researcher must conduct what Mertens (2012) calls

a dependability audit. The dependability audit is meant to show the points where changes occurred in the research process (Mertens, 2012). Thus, to promote the dependability of the study this researcher will take multiple dependability audits as the study is completed to track instances where changes occurred throughout the research process.

Transferability

A final, and particularly important, consideration regarding the trustworthiness of a qualitative study is the transferability of the study. Marshall and Rossman (2006), using Lincoln and Guba (1985) as a model, define transferability as the construct “in which the researcher should argue that his findings will be useful to others in similar situations, with similar research questions or questions of practice” (p. 201). While this researcher is hopeful that the findings of this study could be useful for other researchers and potentially practitioners in the field of online education, he is aware that generalizing must be done with caution in a qualitative study. In fact, Marshall and Rossman (2006) caution that generalizing the findings of a qualitative study could be problematic if it is not done carefully. Nonetheless, if the study does indicate that students in Doctoral Online courses do report a sense of community in the DMIN 810 course after certain course design elements have been altered to require increased social interaction, at the very least, future studies could be conducted to see if the findings could be replicated. If the findings can be confirmed, adding course design elements to online course that require peer to peer interaction could be used as a strategy for fostering a sense of community in online courses. This strategy could be implemented by faculty, staff, and administrators of schools, colleges, and universities. One strategy for ensuring transferability is to “enough details about the research participants and setting so that readers of the research can make a determination as to whether or how the findings from a study might transfer to their own context” (Mertens, 2012, p. 29). Therefore, in

an effort to help confirm transferability, this researcher has provided a detailed account of the who the research participants are as well as the setting for the study in the previous sections devoted to these topics.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the specific research problem to be addressed in this qualitative study. The research questions that will guide this proposed study have been clearly delineated. Further, the research methodology to be utilized for this proposed study has been both defined and described in great detail. This chapter serves the purpose of showing precisely how this phenomenological study will be conducted including articulating the selection of participants, setting, data collection methods, data analysis, and explaining the other integral elements of this research design. Throughout this chapter, this researcher has relied on authoritative texts on the topics of research design and qualitative research to determine how to best approach each of the major components of the research design.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe sense of community experienced by online Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in introductory doctoral courses which were not designed with the goal of community in mind. These courses were DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810. Additionally, this study sought to describe the sense of community experienced by Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in an online course that was deliberately designed to require increased personal interaction amongst peers. This course was DMIN 810. The research questions that guided this study are as follows.

RQ1. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses *before* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ2. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course *after* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ3. What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?

RQ4. Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?

In this chapter, the results of the data analysis will be presented. Specifically, this

chapter focuses on presenting the results of the thematic analysis. First, the protocol measures will be outlined and an overview of the data collection procedures will be provided. Next, the sample will be described. Following the sample information, the specific data analysis is presented in detail along with the findings of the study. The final component of this chapter is an evaluation of the research design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The research instrument utilized in this study was an interview protocol. The interview protocol was the same for each interview that was conducted for this phenomenological study. There were five major subjects that were covered in the interview protocol. The protocol focused on the topics of sense of community, assignments requiring peer-to-peer interaction, the overall course experience, interactions that took place between classmates, and sense of presence in the online classroom. While the interview protocol served as a guide in the interviews, the researcher did not hold to a rigid interview schedule. According to Yin (2011), the interview protocol represents a mental framework of what should be covered within the interview but does not consist of a list of questions that the researcher will ask the participant. Therefore, as participants made interesting comments, asked questions, and explained their answers, the researcher would probe participants for greater clarity. The goal of this practice was to allow the participants to describe their own experiences in as much detail as possible so that their experience in the course was represented accurately.

The data for the study was collected using semi structured interviews. Each interview was conducted over Microsoft Teams and the interviews were audio and video recorded. The researcher was able to transcribe the interviews from a downloadable file from Teams. However, much work had to be done to ensure accuracy in the transcripts. After each interview

was reviewed thoroughly and transcribed, the researcher moved the data into the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Before beginning the coding process, the researcher read through the transcripts to get a general sense of what each interview consisted of. After that, the researcher went through each transcript, line by line, multiple times to code the data. The coding process was done methodically and slowly so that no major themes in the data were missed. This researcher allowed the codes to emerge from the data instead of using predetermined codes. Creswell (2014) indicates that, in general, researchers in the social sciences “allow the codes to emerge during the data analysis” (p. 199). Thus, this was the practice followed by this researcher.

The initial coding process resulted in several codes. Initially, 150 unique codes were generated. However, after the initial coding process, the researcher used the “merge codes” feature in NVivo 12 to narrow the number of codes based on like content. The researcher made several passes through the initial list of codes in order to merge all codes based on like content. For any codes that were unique and could not be merged, the researcher simply left the code unmerged. After merging codes, 49 unique codes remained. Next, the researcher spent time studying the codes to determine alignment with research questions. One code did not align with any research questions: *participant interested in topic*. This code was eliminated from the list resulting in 48 unique codes. These codes are outlined in Table 1.

awareness of community	feelings without community
benefits of community	interest in community lacking
better interaction in other courses	lack of awareness about community
beyond assignment requirements	lack of communication
cause for community	lack of community
community requires intentionality	limited interaction
community restricted	low expectations for community
community when necessary	meeting assignment expectations
comparison between online and face-to-face learning models	mode of community

concern about scheduling	need for relationship
connection with another student	negative feedback
consistent interaction missing	ongoing communication
content without community	online format
course design	participant recommendations
course requirements	positive course experience
course takeaways	positive interactions
deliberate engagement	post covid interaction
descriptions of community	preference for phone communication
desire for engagement	reasons community was avoided
desire for greater community	relationship after class
did not participate in community	relationships
difficulty of community online	reserved but open regarding assignments that require interaction
Discussions	value of peer-to-peer interaction
emphasis on written communication	video conferencing

Using the final list of codes outlined in Table 1, the researcher identified the major themes that emerged from the data. Creswell (2014) suggests identifying five to seven themes for a research study. Creswell's (2014) suggestion was used as a guide for identifying the major themes from the data. Six major themes were identified as the data was analyzed. The six major themes identified were: *without intentionality*, *community is not experienced online*, *intentionality provides opportunities for community online*, *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement*, *community requires reciprocal relationship*, *strategies for enhancing community*, and *students' experience in course*. The research questions were utilized as a guide for identifying the main themes. Four of the six themes aligned with the four research questions.

The theme that aligned with research question 1 (RQ1) was *without intentionality*, *community is not experienced online*. It is important to note that, for this theme, data was used only from answers to interview questions from participants that took an introductory course in the DMIN program before changes were made that were meant to increase social interaction

amongst peers in the class. While the code “comparison between online and face-to-face learning models” aligned with the first two themes, the specific data was considered separately. Meaning, only data that was unique to the two participants who took the introductory courses before changes were made was considered as it related to theme 1. Using only the data from these participants ensured alignment with RQ1. These participants were enrolled in EVCP 810 and DSMN 810 respectively. Interestingly, a number of items that were coded and attributed to these individuals were exclusively noted by these individuals. For example, two codes that were unique to these participants were “community requires intentionality” and “difficulty of community online.” Exploring the data in this way helped the researcher develop a deeper understanding of the experience of the students who took the different introductory courses. Unsurprisingly, similar observations were made regarding the second research question.

The theme that aligned with research question 2 (RQ2) was *intentionality provides opportunities for community online*. As was the case with RQ1 and its related theme, only certain data was considered for this particular theme. Because this research question dealt specifically with descriptions of community after changes were made to the introductory course in the DMIN program, only data from participants who were enrolled in DMIN 810 was considered relevant to this theme. Again, there were certain codes that were unique to students who took DMIN 810. As an example, only students who took DMIN 810 course spoke about having an “awareness of community.”

For the remaining themes, data from all participants was considered together. The theme *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement* aligned with research question 3 (RQ3) and the theme *community requires reciprocal relationship* aligned with research question 4 (RQ4). While the last two themes *strategies for enhancing community* and

student experience in course did not align with any research question, they were noteworthy because the themes were so prevalent in the data. Table 2 provides a visual illustration of alignment between the research questions and the major themes. In addition, Table 2 shows how each code aligns with a respective theme.

Table 2

Research Question	Theme	Codes
RQ1. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses before certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?	Without intentionality, community is not experienced online	*Community requires intentionality *Comparison between online and face-to-face learning models *Concern about scheduling *Content without community *Difficulty of community online *Lack of awareness about community *Low expectations for community *Meeting assignment expectations *Online format
RQ2. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course <i>after</i> certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?	Intentionality provides opportunities for community online	*Awareness of community *Beyond assignment requirements *Comparison between online and face-to-face learning models *Community when necessary *Connection with another student *Did not participate in community *Mode of community *Ongoing communication *Relationship after class *Value of peer-to-peer interaction
RQ3. What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?	Intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement	*Course design *Lack of communication *Limited interaction *Meeting assignment expectations *Mode of community *Reasons community was avoided
RQ4. Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer	Community requires reciprocal relationship	*Benefits of community *Better interaction in other courses *Consistent interaction missing *Descriptions of community *Feelings without community

interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?		*Interest in community lacking *Lack of community *Need for relationship *Relationships
Additional theme	Strategies for enhancing community	*Cause for community *Community restricted *Deliberate engagement *Desire for engagement *Desire for greater community *Emphasis on written communication *Participant recommendations *Post covid interactions *Preference for phone communication *Reserved but open regarding assignments that require interaction *Video conferencing
Additional theme	Students' experience in course	*Course requirements *Course takeaways *Discussions *Negative feedback *Positive course experience *Positive interactions

Demographic and Sample Data

The sample consisted of five participants from the Doctor of Ministry Program. According to Creswell (2014), for a phenomenological study, the sample size should range from approximately three to ten participants. Thus, five participants follows the guidelines that Creswell (2014) offers for a study of this type. There were four male participants and one female. Of the four male participants, two were White Non-Hispanic, and two were Black Non-Hispanic. The one female participant was Black Non-Hispanic. The participants ranged in age from 36-65. Two participants were enrolled in the discipleship cognate of the program, one each in pastoral care and counseling, pastoral and ministry leadership, and chaplaincy. Three participants completed DMIN 810, one completed EVCP 810, and one completed DSMN 810.

Data Analysis and Findings

Research Question 1

RQ1 asked: “Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses before certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *without intentionality, community is not experienced online*.

Without Intentionality, community is not experienced online

The theme *without intentionality, community is not experienced online* emerged as the researcher studied the answers from participants enrolled in EVCP 810 and DSMN 810. These participants were James and Harold. Throughout the interview with James, he indicated that he wished community could have been stronger in the introductory course that he took. Harold’s interview seemed to echo the sentiment offered by James. Harold likewise spoke about the overall lack of community in the introductory course that he completed as part of the DMIN program. The overall sense that this researcher got from interviewing the participants enrolled in DSMN 810 and EVCP 810 was that a sense of community was not perceived by these participants. The words of these participants seem to support this notion.

Harold had some especially strong words regarding the lack of community in the class. He described his experience in this course as “totally disconnected” and followed up by saying “I did not feel a sense of community at all with the other students.” At one point in the interview, Harold asked a rhetorical question saying, “Were these other students even actually in the class?” When asked about community in his course, James simply said that “there wasn’t really a sense of community.” Additionally, James indicated that he did not feel as if he and his classmates “were in a form of community.” Based on the words of these two participants, it seems safe to conclude that, in the introductory courses before changes were made to require increased interaction, community was not being experienced. Interestingly, these participants

did not simply say there was no community and leave the researcher searching for a cause. Instead, in how they responded to other questions, these participants explained why community may have been absent in their experience in DSMN 810 and EVCP 810.

Both James and Harold frequently expressed that students in the class were focused on meeting basic assignment expectations. When asked about student engagement in the class regarding class discussions, Harold stated “but my experience or how I feel about it is most of the people approach it just an assignment that needs to get done and are really not interested in any interaction.” Again, as it relates to discussion board interaction in the course, Harold said “So it just becomes just one more assignment to check off the box to get done so I can get my grade and move on instead of a real discussion and sharing of ideas.” James’ comments were very similar to Harold’s. James indicated that students were interacting in class discussions “just to complete the assignment.” In another place, he noted “my specific experience it was just very you know here’s a reply and that met the requirement of that assignment.” What can be gleaned from both of these students’ responses is that they saw their classmates as interested only in meeting the expectations of what was required of them. According to James and Harold, students focused on meeting the expectations that were designed as part of the course. Students were seemingly not seeking out community on their own but, if it had been designed as part of the course, perhaps a sense of community could have been fostered more effectively.

One of the unique codes that emerged from the research was “community requires intentionality.” Interestingly, the only two participants to have this code attributed to them were James and Harold. The comments they offer on the importance of intentional community are exceedingly helpful. James stated that “You know all the tools are there to interact with people but I don’t know if there is anything that prompts people beyond just the assignments.”

Additionally, he indicated “To really have a sense of community I think it’s gonna you know it’s gonna take some form of sacrifice or intentionality to get to a sense of community cause it doesn’t happen on its own.” Harold’s stance on intentionality as it relates to course community and design is summarized succinctly when he says:

So maybe the courses could be more than just a post your initial thread and respond two students. Kind of a thing where there's more of a grade on the and I don't know how you would do it, but more of a grade based on the interaction and actual discussion rather than just a good job, loved your post kind of a response and referencing a book in the you know, yeah, from the course that there is actual interaction.

It appears that both students recognize that community does not occur by happenstance but must be intentionally fostered and that intentionality must take place at the course design level.

Overall, as this researcher analyzed the data related to RQ1, the theme *without intentionality, community does not happen online* emerged clearly. It became obvious fairly early in the interviews with James and Harold that they simply did not experience community in the introductory DMIN courses that they completed. The fact that the focus of their class was on meeting assignment expectations established as part of the course and that these participants recognize the significance of course design as it relates to community seems to indicate that unless a faculty member or course designer is intentional about how he or she sets up a course, community will not simply occur on its own.

Research Question 2

RQ2 asked: “Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course after certain course requirements are added that are

designed to increase social interaction among students?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *intentionality provides opportunities for community online*.

Intentionality Provides Opportunities for Community Online

The theme *intentionality provides opportunities for community online* emerged as the researcher studied the data from interviews of participants who completed DMIN 810. Because RQ2 deals with sense of community after changes were made to a given course, only data from participants who completed DMIN 810 was considered as it relates to the related theme. These participants were Susan, Jake, and Ralph. These participants provided intriguing answers as it relates to sense of community in the online classroom. Even though all of these participants completed the same course, their interviews provided differing perspectives on some of the core issues related to the study. Nevertheless, there were some common threads that unified the participants’ responses that helped the researcher identify the theme of *intentionality provides opportunities for community online*.

Susan, Jake, and Ralph were all aware of community in the DMIN 810 course that they completed. Yet, some participants’ description of community and awareness of community was more comprehensive than others. For example, Ralph indicated that he “knew it (community) was there for questions and for clarity.” He also said, “There was some community actually that I recall tapping into if there was a project I didn't understand, I could go and see where a couple of my classmates maybe was asking questions amongst each other.” Susan recognized that there were certain locations within the course where one could go to experience community, which she referred to as “community boards.” Jake, on the other hand, described his experience with community a bit different. He did not merely acknowledge the existence of community but said that community was “an integral part of the course.” He said that, for him, ongoing

communication with his peers throughout the course helped him to “feel the presence of community more.” While described in different ways, each of the participants who completed DMIN 810 appear to indicate that, at the minimum, they acknowledge that there were opportunities to experience community in the DMIN 810 course.

On a related note, although all three participants who took DMIN 810 indicated they were aware of opportunities to experience community, not all of these participants took advantage of these opportunities. For instance, when asked about community in the DMIN 810 course, Ralph said “I didn't get an opportunity to really invest into that. I know that the class allowed that.” In another place, Ralph said that he knew the community was there but he did not personally get involved. Susan, who seemingly equated community to the community discussion board in the class, said that classmates may have only wanted to get involved in community if “they had a problem.” Essentially, this researcher interpreted this as “community when necessary.” Each of these statements seem to indicate that, although opportunities for community existed in the DMIN 810 course, not all students took advantage of these opportunities. Therefore, it seems to follow that, even if certain course design elements are altered to potentially increase community, this does not ensure that community will take place, especially if the interactions are not required. While opportunities for community may exist, students do not always take advantage of these opportunities.

In terms of specific opportunities for students to experience community in the online course, students often pointed to the discussion board as the mode of community. After indicating that he did experience a sense of community in DMIN 810, Jake said that he experienced a sense of community through “primarily the discussion board.” In another place, Jake said that the “discussion board really, really, really helped the sense of community.” Ralph

indicated that the primary way in which he felt a sense of community was also through the discussion boards. Additionally, two of the students who completed DMIN 810 also explained that community was experienced when they were required to interact with students outside of class. Jake remembered the assignment that required “getting to know the students where you engage with the students privately just to discuss some things.” When asked how this assignment may have impacted the sense of community he experienced in DMIN 810, Jake said:

I think the assignment helped to realize ministry from a wider perspective you get to understand the ministry context from a broader perspective like some of I think I got engaged with two other students who were also pastors and who were in a different city. So, I got to understand ministry from a different perspective, and I got to learn some things which were not open to me up to that moment, but I got to learn some things from them through and now through. They were in youth ministry so I got to learn how to engage with youth on a different level than what I was thinking I was operating on.

Although more concise, Susan described the assignment requiring peer-to-peer interaction as “very good.” She indicated that she was able to develop a relationship with one individual from the course as a result of this assignment that lasted even beyond the class. Susan also said that “throughout the course we you know, we conversated that was a good thing.” As this researcher reviewed the data related to this research question and the participants’ answers to the interview questions, it became clear that the primary ways in which students in DMIN 810 experienced community was through class discussions boards and through the assignment that required students to get to know one another on a personal level.

After analyzing the data from the DMIN 810 students, the main observations that can be made are that participants were aware of community in the class, not all students took advantage

of opportunities to participate in community. Community was generally limited to discussion boards and the assignment that required getting to know other students outside of class. As one reviews the general observations, it becomes evident that intentional course design can create opportunities for community to be experienced but that does not mean that community will automatically be experienced by all students. Some students may simply recognize that community is taking place and not participate. This notion is further supported as one considers the third theme and RQ3.

Research Question 3

RQ3 asked: “What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement*.

Intentional Design Cannot Overcome Student Disengagement

The theme *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement* emerged as the researcher sought to understand how certain course design elements might impact the description of experienced sense of community in the DMIN courses. What became apparent in the data analysis is that, while course design can create opportunities for community, as outlined in the analysis above, this does not guarantee that community will occur. Student engagement or disengagement is a factor to be considered when looking at community in the online classroom. Students from both DMIN 810 and DSMN 810 noted this in their interviews. For example, Harold noted that he looked “at where they were physically located and one of them was fairly close to my hometown and I sent him an email and he never responded.” In regards to the class

discussions, Harold indicated that “even like when I would respond to somebody's post, I would ask questions and I don't ever recall getting a response to my response.” Susan seemed to have the same experience in the DMIN 810 course she took. She said, “I even remember emailing a student he never emailed me back.” Both of these experiences seemed to negatively impact how these participants described the sense of community in the course that they completed. In fact, in the interview, both of the participants seemed a bit upset by the fact that their emails and posts were ignored by their classmates. In fact, Susan went as far as to say that the fact that the student didn't respond to her was a reason she didn't want to be involved in community. More specifically, after the student did not respond to her email, Susan stated “So I just said oh forget it and I just didn't go to the board anymore.” It started to become obvious that regardless of which course a student was enrolled in or how that course may have been designed, some of the impetus for community needed to come from the student. Even when all the tools needed to foster a sense of community are available to a student or even if another student in the class attempts to build a relationship with the student, the student will not experience community without engaging his or her classmates. There appears to be a need for reciprocal or mutual relationships in order for there to be an instructional and spiritual benefit to all participants.

This theme is further developed by examining how participants describe points of interaction in the courses they took. According to James, an EVCP 810 student, the interactions in the class were limited exclusively to the discussion boards. James was not receiving emails, calls, meeting requests, or video calls from his classmates. Instead, James stated clearly that “The interaction was very limited to Discussion Board prompts.” In another instance, James said “Within classmates I think it was just restricted to those Discussion Board posts and um in those particular classes I didn't have anything beyond those posts.” Harold also saw a lack of

interaction between student in the class he completed outside of discussion board assignments. He said “I honestly wasn't aware of any interaction between the students” outside of the class discussion boards that were required. On a related note, four of the five participants for the study indicated that students in the class were concerned primarily with meeting assignment expectations. Harold’s comments on engagement seem to indicate that doing the bare minimum does not count as fostering a sense of community. When talking about class discussion boards, Harold said, “I saw that more is just everybody was just trying to completely satisfy the requirements of the assignment. Rather than engage and interact with the other students.” It appears that, if discussion is limited only to the discussion board area in a given course and students are simply trying to complete their assignments in order to move forward in the course, real community will not be experienced. It seems that a core component is necessary in order for students to experience community in an online classroom. The core component for experiencing a sense of community is explored in theme four along with RQ4.

Research Question 4

RQ4 asked: “Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?” The theme identified that aligned with this research question was *community requires reciprocal relationship*.

Community Requires Reciprocal Relationship

The theme *community requires reciprocal relationship* emerged as the researcher analyzed how research participants described the community in the courses they completed, the

benefits of community identified by the participants, the feelings experienced when community was not present, and how participants actually noted the importance of relationships as it relates to the concept of community. This section outlines some of the most important statements from participants related to the theme *community requires reciprocal relationship*.

While the descriptions of community offered by participants varied, the core motif that seemed to appear as a common thread was that *community requires reciprocal relationship*. In the words of participants like Jake, the need for relationship was overtly stated as he reflected on the positive elements of sense of community in DMIN 810. Jake described his peers as “brothers,” which certainly implies the necessity of relationship. In a more robust description of community, Jake said the community in the class was like “Fellow students wanting to know more. The older ones wanted to know more from the younger ones. The younger ones wanted to know more from the older ones, and it became really interesting to learn from each other’s experience.” It seems obvious that learning from one’s peers in this way requires more than just simple responses to meet requirements but instead it requires reciprocal relationship. James, on the other hand, described community in the class as something he “wished could be stronger.” More specifically, James said “I think if we can dialogue more beyond just assignments, I think it would more enrich the experience.” Going beyond the assignment requirements into matters that are beyond the content of the course and are by nature more personal again implies the need for relationship. In another place, James highlights the need for relationship as it relates to community when he gives an example of community he experienced at a work conference. He said:

Anytime I go to let’s say a conference for work or something I see this play out in a big way like you know I experience let’s say if I go to a workshop and I see you know a

dozen people you know that I'll see over the course of a couple days all day long because we're sharing the experience and we're sitting through a lecture or a presentation and you know by the end of the course because we've had points of interaction and sometimes we've gone out to lunch and by the end of it we're exchanging numbers and we're exchanging business cards to the point where some people that I've met at conferences I still talk to because um because of the points of interaction and so from that you know if you didn't have full out community during that experience you've taken it with you and the community kinda goes with you.

At the heart of this example is the idea of relationship. The people that James stayed in touch with and went to lunch with and ultimately built community with were the individuals he built relationships with. Relationships are essential for community to take place.

The descriptions of community offered by participants provided numerous insights as it the essential nature of relationships for community but how participants described the benefits of community also highlighted that relationships are crucial for community to occur. James provides some helpful thoughts on this topic when he says "Going back to the community part just knowing more about who that person is so if that person is a pastor or they have some kind of experience where they can speak into what you just posted I think that would just mean more." James says that interaction with classmates means more when it comes from someone you actually know about and what their background is. This statement speaks to the benefits of community but also the importance of relationship. In sum, according to James, interaction with classmates mean more when classmates have a relationship that goes beyond course content. As she described the benefits of community that came as a result of the assignment that required peer-to-peer interaction in DMIN 810, Susan also implied the need for relationships. She said:

“I mean it was a good thing, especially doing courses online. You have someone else. You can throw bounce questions and answers off of rather than trying to figure it out yourself or you have to wait and then ask the professor you have someone who just like you could if you had a test you can go over things with that person and kind of study, you know.”

Susan’s words demonstrate that having someone in the class that the student has a relationship with gives the student a person they can go to with questions or issues they may be having in the course. Again, relationship shines through as essential for these types of interactions to take place. If the students were not connected and did not have a relationship, it is hard to say whether or not students would feel they could go to their classmates with issues. In another instance, Susan was asked to describe how the assignment that required peer-to-peer interaction impacted her perception of community and she said, “At least you had someone there that you could talk to.” At the minimum, this assignment gave students a peer in the class that they had a relationship with. When Jake was asked how the assignment that required peer-to-peer interaction influenced his understanding of community in DMIN 810, Jake said:

I think the assignment helped to realize ministry from a wider perspective. You get to understand the ministry context from a broader perspective like some of I think I got engaged with two other students who were also pastors who were in a different city. So, I got to understand ministry from a different perspective and I got to learn some things which were not were not open to me up to that moment, but I got to learn some things from them through and now through. They were in youth ministry. So, I got to learn how to engage with youth on a different level than what I was thinking I was operating on.

The relationships that Jake built with his peers in the class were foundational for learning from his peers. He got to know these individuals on a personal level, which allowed him to see the unique experiences these individuals had and to also learn from these experiences. As each of these statements are analyzed and evaluated with the other data in view, it seems reasonable to conclude that relationships are foundational to the perceived sense of community experienced in online Doctor of Ministry courses.

The need for relationship as it relates to community became clear not only when benefits of community were analyzed and as community was described but also when participants described their feelings when community was not experienced. When asked about the overall sense of community in DMIN 810, Ralph said that “The human side was left out of it.” This statement clearly implies that relationships between Ralph and his peers did not exist. After being presented with the definition of community being used for this study and being asked to respond, James said “you know in this course it was just difficult to only see names a couple times throughout the semester and then by the end of it, it feels forgotten.” James saw some of his classmates as names just in the class discussion board that would soon be forgotten. Had there been a real, personal relationship between peers in the class, these feelings about community may have been different. Relationships were missing. Therefore, community was not experienced in a real and tangible way.

Finally, while the need for relationship for community to take place can be discerned through perceptive data analysis, there were several occasions in which participants simply stated that relationships were essential for community. For example, James said:

I don't know like any of my classmates I just didn't know any anything more about them so it's hard to get the you know I can take the feedback with a grain of salt and you know

it's good to get some thought on what I posted. I think it would mean more if I knew that person a little bit more or maybe we've developed some form of relationship.

In a different place, James said "I feel like community has to involve a sense of getting to know each other like it would have to go beyond just that assignment I guess." Susan also remembered an instance where she emailed a student and they shared correspondence because they knew one another. She said, "I emailed someone and they emailed me back because I kinda knew who they were." Jake made an especially interesting point regarding the importance of relationship for community when he said:

During the discussion board from what this person has gotta say, it makes me look forward more to when the assignment on discussion boards come up or when it says people come on discussion board because the two students I got engaged with where they their assignments were the first set of assignments I look forward to because I've gotten like getting to know them a little bit in that sense. So, I want to read more from them before going to others.

Jake indicated that the two students that he built a relationship with in the course were the students he would deliberately engage with in the class discussion board. He focused on these students because, in his own words, he had built a relationship with these individuals. Thus, relationship was essential for both class communication and class community.

Taken together, all of this data points to the idea that *community requires reciprocal relationship*. Whether a student completed DMIN 810, EVCP 810, or DSMN 810, participants indicated that in order for community to be experienced, their needed to be relationship among classmates. Interestingly, students like Jake, who completed DMIN 810, actually experienced

those relationships whereas students like James who completed EVCP 810 discussed the need for those relationships even though he did not experience them. Yet, even Ralph, who completed DMIN 810, noted the need for relationships but indicated it was something he wish could have been stronger in the course. Though the relationship between the description of community offered by participants who took courses that were deliberately changed with the goal of community in mind and courses that were not may not be overtly clear, what is clear is that students see relationship as essential for community.

Additional Themes

Strategies for Enhancing Community Online

Although the final two themes did not directly relate to any particular research question, it seems they did relate to the overall subject and scope of the study. All of the participants for the study offered “participant recommendations.” These recommendations along with other related data helped the researcher identify the theme *strategies for enhancing community online*. One of the frequently suggested strategies for enhancing community in the online classroom centered on integrating video conferencing into online courses. Ralph said, “if I could suggest improvement in that area that there’s a time to where now we can get on Microsoft Teams.” In another place, Ralph indicated “I think that when we can see face to face, eye to eye, and versus only paper written that builds trust and definitely and it you know we basically communication and trust and being able to see each other. Builds a good community.” By face-to-face, the participant seemingly meant over Microsoft Teams once again because he said, “as we are doing today.” Once again, Ralph stated “I would like to have seen more of this type of interaction to where we can kind of be able to talk some things through.” Susan also sees the value integrating some video conferencing into online courses. She noted:

Think about, you know having the team effect or the zoom effect where you can see your classmates and you can interact with them versus not saying anything. Just email. Or if I get a chance I'll talk to you type of thing. So, I think it should be more interactive.

James likewise seemed open to the idea of incorporating video conferencing into online courses. He said, “the incorporation of things like zoom calls or um those things have never really been offered or even suggested.”

Another popular participant recommendation was making changes to the class discussion board requirements so that these more appropriately encouraged community. Harold provides an excellent summary of this point when he said:

So maybe the course could be more than just a post your initial thread and respond to two students. Kind of a thing where there's more of a grade on the and I don't know how you would do it, but more of a great based on the interaction and actual discussion rather than just a good job, loved your post kind of a response and referencing a book in the you know, yeah, from the course that there is actual interaction.

Harold sees the discussion board as a place where community could occur, but it would have to be set up and graded in a deliberate manner. On a related note, James said “within the class it’s just difficult to do that if it’s the only time you’re you know in a sense forced to interact is maybe a couple of assignments.” If students are only required to interact in the discussions a few times per term, he does not think that community will really occur. The suggestion he offered focused on creating consistent opportunities for interaction throughout the class. He said, “So in this course, I think if there were opportunities to have consistent community or consistent interactions, I think that would just maybe by default start to build a sense of community.”

Consistency in interactions could potentially be built into the discussion boards in the course but again this would take deliberate design. Ralph also commented on the importance of designing class discussion boards in an intentional way that promotes interaction from the very start of the course. He stated:

I hope and pray that there was more and can be for future class more interaction in the very beginning. So that we can connect all the way through the process of while we're together. You know starting at the discussion board level.

Ralph's words highlight the opportunities for community that could occur in the class discussions if they are designed in a certain way with the goal of community in mind, which is an idea that multiple participants also alluded to in their responses. Each of these recommendations gives the impression that participants think that community can, in fact, be experienced in an online course if the conditions are right. These participant recommendations will perhaps provide a valuable addition to this student in the recommendations for future research section in Chapter 5.

Students' Experience in the Course

A final theme to emerge was *students' experience in the course*. This theme, while not related to any specific research question, did have some relation to the overall scope of the study. What this researcher found interesting was that no student said that they had a poor experience in the class they took. Whether in DMIN 810, DSMN 810, or EVCP 810, each participant who spoke directly about their experience in the course said the experience was positive. Jake said the DMIN 810 course he took was "A really good experience for me." When asked about the EVCP 810 course he took, James said "Sure. Yeah. It was a class that I did enjoy." Ralph, who

completed DMIN 810, said “What I experienced in the class was great” and “it was a good course.” Susan likewise spoke positively of her experience in DMIN 810 when she said, “As far as my first course, which is the DMIN 810, I enjoyed the course.” While some students noted certain aspects of the course they wish could have been stronger, the overall sense was that participants had positive course experiences.

Further, when asked about their experiences in the course, participants frequently remembered and discussed the course requirements. James, for example, said “And I remember um there were two specific prompts in this class that um we had to respond to we were required to respond to at least two other posts that were given by classmates.” Ralph said “I had options to download the pamphlet that had how the IRB process would go, how the thesis would go and so I did have options to look at that and that helped me get on a good track so I wasn’t just shocked at what was expected of me.” Susan also remembered specific assignments in the class that she took including learning “APA and Turabian” as well as “understanding journal articles.” While the fact that participants remembered assignment expectations may not seem relevant to the study, as one thinks through the implications of this reality, the relevance to the study becomes clearer. If opportunities for community were deliberately integrated into the fabric of a given course as actual assignments, perhaps community would be experienced by students on a more widespread level. Students remember what was required of them in courses. Thus, perhaps, if engagement, relationship building, video conferencing, and consistent interaction were required, it would make a lasting impact on students as much as other course requirements do.

Evaluation of the Research Design

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological design. Phenomenology focuses on describing the lived experience of individuals about a given phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). For

this study, the lived experience being examined was the sense of community in a given online Doctor of Ministry course at Liberty University. The phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because it provided the researcher deep, rich data from detailed interviews with participants who completed certain Doctor of Ministry courses. Community, as defined in this study, is something that can be experienced in the online classroom, but it is something that must be experienced first-hand by students in a given class. Thus, getting a first-hand account of how community is described by students in a class is an especially valuable means of understanding how community was experienced by these students. A phenomenological design “culminates in the essence of the experiences for several individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). The fact that the researcher had the opportunity to interview multiple students who took the same course provided especially pertinent data as it relates to a phenomenological design. The findings that emerged from this study provided various beneficial insights related to the idea of community in the online classroom. More specifically, the major themes that emerged from this study were *without intentionality, community is not experienced online, intentionality provides opportunities for community online, intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement, community requires reciprocal relationship, strategies for enhancing community, and students’ experience in course*. As a result of using a phenomenological design, this researcher truly understands the experience of community as described by the participants in this study.

Summary

This chapter provided a detailed overview of the analysis and findings for this phenomenological study. The specific interview protocol information was explained as well as the demographic information for the sample that was used for the study. Additionally, the

researcher explained the steps he took in order to code the vast amount of data that was gathered for this study. The themes that emerged from the data set were articulated and explained in great detail. Finally, the research design was evaluated and reasons for using this design were explained. Research conclusions are covered in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to describe the sense of community in online Doctor of Ministry courses offered through the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University. Chapter 5 articulates the conclusions, implications, and applications of the findings that came as a result of this study. The major conclusions, implications, and applications are arranged according to the research questions that guided the study. Limitations of the study are also explained. Additionally, ideas for future research that came as a result of completing this study are articulated in the final section of this chapter.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe sense of community experienced by online Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in introductory doctoral courses which were not designed with the goal of community in mind. These courses were DSMN 810, LEAD 810, and EVCP 810. Additionally, this study will sought to describe the sense of community experienced by Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University in an online course that was deliberately designed to require increased personal interaction amongst peers. This course is DMIN 810.

Research Questions

The following Research Questions guided this study:

RQ1. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses *before* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ2. Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course *after* certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?

RQ3. What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?

RQ4. Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

Conclusions

The findings from this study were quite extensive. Based on the data and the themes that emerged by analyzing the data, the researcher was able to answer the four research questions that guided this study. RQ1 asked: “Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in particular online courses before certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *without intentionality, community is not experienced online*. Essentially, the two participants who completed the courses that were not designed with course requirements added that were designed to increase social interaction among students did not describe a sense of community in these courses. As the researcher analyzed the answers these participants provided to the interview questions, it became evident that intentional course design is an essential component to establishing a sense of community in online courses.

RQ2 asked: “Do online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in a particular online course after certain course requirements are added that are designed to increase social interaction among students?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *intentionality provides opportunities for community online*. The researcher was careful and deliberate in his naming of this theme that emerged from the data analysis. Intentionality in course design can certainly provide opportunities for community to occur online but that does not necessarily ensure that community will occur in the online classroom. The participants who completed DMIN 810 acknowledged an awareness of opportunities for community but not all of the participants indicated that they actually experienced community in the DMIN 810 course they completed. In fact, some of the participants in DMIN 810 still contended they did not experience community. Thus, this research question is answered simply by saying that designing the course with certain elements in mind can provide opportunities for community to occur but does not ensure community will necessarily happen.

The answer to the second research question actually has implications for the third research question as well. RQ3 asked “What perceived influence do course design elements that are intended to increase social interaction among students have on how online Doctor of Ministry students describe a sense of community experienced in an online course?” The theme that aligned with this research question was *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement*. What the researcher found as he analyzed data related to this researcher question was that student engagement or disengagement will impact the experienced sense of community in an online course. Multiple participants, for example, remember reaching out to students in an attempt to connect with them and their emails were simply ignored. Thus, while

course design elements that promote social interaction with the goal of encouraging community can influence how online Doctor of Ministry students describe the sense of community in their courses, these course design elements cannot overcome students who are unwilling to participate in community in a way that is meaningful for all students. It became apparent to the researcher that, for community to be experienced in a meaningful way, students had to go beyond simply meeting assignment expectations for the sake of completing tasks. Students had to build relationships with their classmates, which leads to RQ4 and its corresponding theme.

RQ4 asked “Is there a discernable difference between how students describe a sense of community in courses that are not intentionally designed with the goal of community and peer-to-peer interaction in mind and a course that was intentionally designed with the goal of community in mind?” The theme identified that aligned with this research question was *community requires reciprocal relationship*. There were some differences between how students who took DMIN 810 and students who took the other introductory courses described the sense of community in their classes, especially as it dealt with the specific assignment that required peer-to-peer interaction. However, what was even more obvious from participant answers was that relationship was required for community to take place. The relationship had to go beyond merely meeting assignment expectations. Instead, classmates needed to get to know their peers just for the sake of getting to know them as people. After the relationship was established, then more meaningful discussions could take place in class discussions and peers could learn from one another’s experiences.

Relationship of Conclusions to Literature

One of the major contentions made in the literature related to community in the online classroom is that community is ideal in the online classroom (Boling et al., 2012; Gallagher-

Lepak et al., 2009; Young & Bruce, 2011). The findings of this study seem to support this idea as the participants from this study frequently mentioned the benefits of community in the online classroom in their own words. Because of the overwhelming amount of research on the value of community in the online classroom, this finding did not come as a surprise. Another major theme in the research related to community in the online classroom is that community in online courses does not occur by happenstance. Cuthbertson and Falcone (2014) and Young and Bruce (2011) argue that community building activities must be a priority for course designers and online faculty members should one hope to promote community in the online classroom. This study confirms what these researchers have found in their studies. In fact, multiple participants noted plainly that community does not simply happen on its own. However, the data from this study goes beyond saying that community building activities must be deliberately designed into a course and asserts that relationships must be established between peers before community can happen.

One statement made by Young and Bruce (2011) was used as a guiding concept for this study. The authors stated, “Instructors who purposefully design learning activities to create opportunities for students to learn about each other, thereby decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence are likely to improve learners’ sense of classroom community” (Young and Bruce, 2011, p. 219). What this study found is that, while course design can create opportunities for students to learn about each other and potentially increase a learners’ sense of community, this does not always happen for every student. When students are disengaged and do not participate in community building activities, community will not occur no matter how well a course is designed. Students must be motivated to participate in community and in some cases they simply are not. In fact, one of the participants in this study said that he was

“perfectly fine” not being involved in community as this was not one of his goals in taking the course.

Another theme in the literature that can be evaluated in light of the findings of this study is the concept of social presence. Garrison et al. (2000) define social presence as “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (p. 89). According to Stopa (2017), social presence can be developed through learner-to-learner interactions as well as instructor-to-learner interactions. What this study confirmed is the value of social presence in the online classroom. Many participants spoke about the significance of getting to know their classmates and learning personal characteristics about their peers. The responses provided by these participants points to the need for social presence in the online classroom for building community. However, as this researcher reflects on the theme *community requires reciprocal relationship*, it seems that community requires more than merely conveying one’s personal characteristics to the rest of one’s class. Relationship involves more than simply stating facts about oneself but is concerned with a bond with another person. Looking back to the definition of community that guided this study demonstrates the importance of relationship for experiencing community. Rovai (2002a) defines classroom community using four dimensions: “spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals, in this case, learning” (p. 4). The first dimension of Rovai’s (2002a) definition is spirit. Rovai (2002a) says that spirit “denotes recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and bonding that develop among learners as they enjoy one another and look forward to time spent together” (p. 4). Reflecting on this definition after the study was completed and through the lenses of what was discovered as the data was analyzed,

it becomes clear that Rovai's (2002a) description of spirit seems to imply that it is relationship that is required for community to take place. The concept of spirit goes beyond merely telling a person some facts about one's life but results in "looking forward to time spent together" (Rovai, 2002a). Therefore, this study confirms what Rovai (2002a) noted as the requisites for community and summarizes what is essential for community in the theme *community requires reciprocal relationship*.

Implications and Applications

The findings of this study have implications both theoretically and practically. At a macro level, this study confirms the widely held notions that community is ideal in the online learning environment, it can be experienced in the online classroom, and course designers and instructors should make deliberate efforts to design courses in such a way that strategies for enhancing the sense of community are integrated into the design of a given course. The major themes of the literature related to community in the online classroom were confirmed as the findings for this study were brought to light. Individuals who are researching the concept of community in the online classroom should continue to focus attention and effort on determining the best strategies for enhancing the sense of community in online classrooms. It does appear that creating opportunities for students to engage in community is a helpful first step for establishing community in the online classroom. However, what the findings from this study seem to also show is that community cannot ultimately be forced on students. If students do not want relationship and therefore do not want community, they simply will avoid activities that require them to engage their classmates. Even if certain elements are added to the course that require interaction, if the student has no desire to build relationships and community, he or she will simply complete the task for the required points and real community will not be

experienced. Perhaps this is why some DMIN 810 students seemed to experience profound community while others withdrew from community because their emails were ignored.

On a practical level, this means that instructors and course designers need to reflect on how far they want to go to create opportunities to build community in the online classroom. Although this finding was not developed in great detail, a couple of participants noted concern about assignments that required interaction due to scheduling concerns and the general nature of online learning. One participant noted that online courses are marketed as “do this at your own pace” and to require certain interactions that would require a synchronous element could be problematic. On a related note, this researcher wonders how relationships can be forced on students. If relationship is key for building community, it seems that somehow instructors would need to force students to build relationships with one another. It is not clear if this is possible or even desirable. It seems that the very nature of a real relationship depends on a willingness to be involved in that relationship. Nevertheless, this research seems to support the idea that instructors should still add certain requirements to their courses that promote social interaction about topics outside the scope of course content. The students who completed DMIN 810 and described the assignment that required peer-to-peer interaction outside of class described this assignment in a positive manner. No negative feedback was provided about this assignment. Deliberate design must remain a priority for online educators. Community does not occur without taking certain steps to provide opportunities for students to engage in community in the online classroom.

As it relates to specific points of application, this researcher suggests that faculty who can develop or redevelop online courses should take the opportunity to add assignments to the course that require peer-to-peer interaction outside of class. The general suggestion would be to

require each student in the class to connect with at least two other classmates and interact with them outside of class. Before completing this study, the suggestion would have been to have the students call one another on the phone to ask personal questions. However, after this study, it seems that video conferencing may be a more valuable option. This researcher suggests Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or Skype. The instructor should also provide a list of what personal questions the students should ask one another. Topics could include vocation, geographic location, family life, hobbies, etc. After these students connect, they must “meet” with their two classmates at least one other time throughout the term. Then, at the end of the course, the students must complete a quiz verifying that this task was completed and must provide a write-up of the interactions that took place. Additionally, this researcher would suggest having students write a reflection on the assignment that required the interaction to get feedback on the assignment. The prompts for this assignment could be developed in such a way so the instructor may gauge the value of the assignment based on the students’ writing.

Research Limitations

This study was limited to currently enrolled Doctor of Ministry Students at Liberty University who are completing their courses entirely from a distance. Students who completed DMIN 810 in Fall 2018 and LEAD 810, DMSN 810, and EVCP in Fall 2017 were asked to participate.

Further Research

While this study yielded useful data concerning community in the online classroom, future research could be done to provide additional insights related to this important topic. As noted previously, this study was delimited to doctoral-level students taking courses entirely online through Liberty University’s John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. There are a number

of potential ways in which this study could be replicated for the future. One of the most obvious ways would be to mirror the procedures utilized in this study to examine undergraduate and graduate level populations of online students. It would be helpful to discern whether or not the findings of this study would be similar or different in undergraduate or graduate level students. Using a phenomenological design was an appropriate manner of studying the topic for this study. Thus, this researcher simply suggests that future research be done using the same type of research design and simply use undergraduate or graduate-level students to serve as the population. Future research of this scope would help to determine if the results of this study can be generalized more widely to online classes as a whole or if the findings should be exclusively applied to doctoral-level students completing coursework entirely from a distance.

Another suggestion for future research would be to study the integration of video conferencing programs into the online classroom. Participants in this study frequently noted the value of video conferencing and seemed open to having course requirements that utilized video conferencing as part of their courses. For the DMIN 810 course that was modified in order to require students to interact outside of course, students were required to call their peers and talk with them over the phone. If a researcher were to attempt to replicate this study in the future, he or she could require students to utilize Teams, Zoom, or Skype to connect with their classmates instead of requiring phone calls. Then, the researcher could essentially use the same research design that was employed in this study to examine how students describe the sense of community in their courses before course requirements were changed and after course requirements were changed. This way the same general study would be replicated but a researcher could focus specifically on asking questions related to the video conferencing component that was added to the course to determine if this had a discernable impact on the

students' described sense of community. While a phenomenological design could certainly be utilized, the interview protocol could be revised so that questions are aimed specifically at the use of video conferencing tools in the online classroom. Much could be learned from a study of this nature that could potentially help future researchers and practitioners discover tangible ways in which a sense of community can be promoted in the online classroom.

One of perhaps the most important themes discovered as a result of completing this study was *community requires reciprocal relationship*. However, because this theme was identified in the final stages of the study, the researcher was not able to probe participants for additional information and insights concerning relationships and community. Further, this researcher was not able to delve into research related to the nature of relationships and discern how relationships may impact the sense of community in an online classroom. As outlined above, the definition of community utilized for this study seems to presuppose the presence of relationships for real community to exist, but relationship was not an emphasis for this researcher before the actual data analysis phase of this study began. In a future study, this researcher's suggestions would be threefold. First, a future study should focus on determining what literature if any shows a clear connection between the concept of reciprocal relationships and the concept of community specifically as it relates to the online classroom. Second, a future study could utilize a phenomenological design similar to the one used in this study but revise the interview protocol so that questions were asked specifically related to relationships and sense of community in the online classroom. Third, this researcher would suggest finding a way to discern whether or not steps can be taken to promote authentic relationships in an online classroom. As this researcher reflects on the nature of relationships, it seems that a real relationship cannot be forced. Relationships must be characterized by reciprocal interaction.

The findings of a study such as the one described in this paragraph could provide future researchers additional strategies for potentially increasing the sense of community in online classes. Additionally, this research could further support one of the findings of this study that, in some ways, community cannot be forced on students because student engagement or disengagement does impact the sense of community in an online classroom.

Additionally, future research could be done to discern how this topic might relate to the COVID-19 pandemic. Across the United States and the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to people spending more time indoors and away from others. Government leaders are urging people to isolate and stay away from groups and gatherings. One cannot help to observe that the global pandemic has likely caused a lack of community that may have been experienced prior to the pandemic. Since this study has shown that community can be experienced in an online classroom and that it is something that, on the whole, students desire, this researcher wonders if theological distance education courses may provide a unique opportunity for community in the midst of the global pandemic. It may be that a student's online courses are one of the only opportunities a student has to be involved in community as a result of the pandemic. Future students could look to discern how students describe community in an online class specifically considering the global pandemic. Questions could be asked about one's perception or feelings about the isolation that came as a result of the global pandemic and to what extent, if any, one's community impacted those feelings. Additionally, researchers could look at how COVID-19 has impacted course design and distance education enrollments. Essentially, there are several ways in which the concept of community could be studied in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A major theme that emerged from this study was *intentional design cannot overcome*

student disengagement. Participants in this study explained that they were aware of the reality of community but simply did not get involved in community. Participants seemed more focused on completing course assignments and earning points on these assignments than building community with their peers. The students simply did not see the value of community as it related to their academic experience in the course they completed. Future studies could be aimed at determining how faculty and course designers overcome this type of student disengagement and lack of interest in community. Researchers could ask “Are there specific ways in which course design can cause students to be more engaged?” and “How does one promote engagement, presence, and reciprocal interactions without making a student feel forced to participate?” A great deal could be learned by studying student disengagement and proactively looking for ways to overcome student disengagement. Determining factors that lead to positive student engagement would help establish more concretely how to promote community in the online classroom.

A final idea for a future study deals with the idea of class discussion or discussion board assignments. Participants for this study repeatedly noted that the class discussions were the primary opportunities for community to occur in the courses they took. Seemingly this was because, in some courses, it was the only place that students were required to interact with their peers. However, some of the participants in the study shared their desire that students in the class participate in the class discussion boards in a way that went beyond the standard assignment expectations. Instead of, for instance, simply posting one thread and two replies, the desire was for ongoing, robust conversation. This researcher wonders whether it is possible to add certain elements to discussion board requirements that would encourage ongoing communication rather than requirements that encourage students to do the minimum that is

required for a grade. A study like this could include both quantitative and qualitative data. A researcher could make certain changes to the discussion board requirements in a given course and complete a before-and-after comparison study to determine what impact the changes had. Students could be interviewed for the qualitative data to discern if the discussions were more meaningful and went beyond the standard expectations. Further, quantitative data could be gathered to discover if the number of posts were higher in the course that had the changes. This study could help to contribute to the data available on how course designers can promote opportunities for community in the online courses that they oversee.

Summary

Due to the fact that online education is in a perpetual state of growth and has been for some time, this researcher wanted to discern how online courses can more effectively equip students for their future vocations. Community is widely considered ideal in the online classroom and this researcher wanted to add to the body of literature related to this important topic. The primary aim of this study was to determine how online Doctor of Ministry students describe the sense of community experienced in online courses before course requirements were added to require peer-to-peer interaction outside of class and discern how the same sample of students describe the sense of community after course requirements were added to require peer-to-peer interaction outside of class. A phenomenological design was utilized so that the phenomenon of sense of community could be studied in great detail.

Many important insights were discovered as a result of completing this study. Yet, perhaps the most significant findings of the study are articulated by simply restating two of the themes that emerged from the qualitative data analysis: *intentional design cannot overcome student disengagement* and *community requires reciprocal relationship*. In a sense, both themes

point to the idea that, while opportunities for community can be provided for a student, some of the responsibility for creating community rests in the hands of the student. For community to truly take place, students must have the desire to be part of the learning community and must be willing to engage in meaningful relationships with their classmates. This is not to say, however, that practitioners should stop trying to foster community in the online classroom. In fact, the opposite is true. The study has shown that deliberate course design can provide the opportunities necessary for students to experience community. Thus, these individuals should put all the more effort into designing their courses in such a way that community exists and students engage in it. It is anticipated that future studies will help provide even more strategies to help create these opportunities for online students. The need for additional research to determine ways in which relationships can form in a more organic fashion should be undertaken. Providing opportunities for promoting connections and interactions in the online classroom offers the likelihood that students will seek to build community of their own volition.

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Appendix A

Consent

Title of the Project: THE PERCEIVED EFFECT OF PROMOTING A SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN ONLINE DOCTORAL COURSES THROUGH INTENTIONAL COURSE DESIGN

Principal Investigator: Lucas Farmer, Ed. D. Candidate, John W. Rawlings School of Divinity.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be 18 years of age and have completed DMIN 810. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the sense of community experienced in online courses by Doctor of Ministry students at Liberty University before and after deliberate design changes were made to DMIN 810 to require increased personal interaction amongst peers. The study is being completed because community is ideal in online courses and it is important to understand whether or not course design can impact the sense of community experienced by students in online courses.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Schedule an interview with the principal investigator of this study and participate in the interview. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete. This is the only data collection procedure requiring human participants. Thus, this is the only procedure that participants are committing to.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include a more robust understanding of community in the online classroom. Should the study show that course design can impact the sense of community described by online doctoral students, online doctoral courses could be designed in a more deliberate and ultimately effective manner. This research could positively impact online theological distance education as a whole.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports 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.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. When reporting on participant responses, pseudonyms will be used instead of participants' actual names. This researcher will also eliminate any details from interview data that could potentially compromise the identify of the participant being interviewed. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews 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.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide 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 will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Lucas Farmer. You may ask any questions you have now. **Personal info removed for publication.**

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix B

Dear Doctor of Ministry Student,

As a fellow doctoral student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education degree. The purpose of my research is to determine how Doctor of Ministry students describe sense of community experienced in a particular online course, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, and they must have completed DMIN 810, LEAD 810, DSMN 810, or EVCP 810. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an audio and video-recorded interview using Microsoft Teams. It should take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour to complete the interview. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please contact me at in order to schedule the interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Should you choose to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior of the interview.

Sincerely,

Lucas Farmer
Ed.D. Candidate

Appendix C

Per the suggestion of Yin (2011) and as outlined in this researcher's prospectus, this study will utilize an interview protocol. According to Yin (2011), "The interview protocol usually contains a small subset of topics—those that are considered relevant to a given interview" (p. 139). Yet, the interview protocol should not be equated to an interview questionnaire (Yin, 2011). Further, the interview protocol represents a mental framework of what should be covered within the interview but does not consist of a list of questions that the researcher will ask the participant (Yin, 2011). Below is a list of the subset of topics that are relevant to the interviews. These topics will guide the questions that are asked to the participants in this phenomenological study.

- The sense of community in the online classroom.
- Assignments in the course that required peer-to-peer interaction.
- The overall experience in the course.
- The interactions that took place between classmates.
- The sense of presence in the online classroom.