BEST PRACTICES OF EXCEPTIONAL PROFESSORS WHO PROGRAM RELEVANCE INTO ONLINE DISTANCE LEARNING COURSES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Keri Ann Palasz

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this proposed transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. The theory that guided this study is Knowles' Adult Learning Theory (ALT), as it clarifies the relationship between course design and delivery and the characteristics of adult learners. This study addressed four research questions posed to a sample of award-winning college professors who teach online distance learning courses in the American field of higher education to understand better what these professors do to convey relevance in a way that appeals to adult learners. Data was collected from teaching philosophy statements, interviews, and observations of recorded lectures. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological model to reveal themes and patterns related to the six assumptions of ALT. The goal of this study was to curate a list of best practices used by exceptional college professors to convey relevance to adult distance learners.

Keywords: relevance, online distance learning, attrition, higher education, best practices

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my loving husband, Michael, who God brought into my life at the perfect time. Michael has consistently inspired me to follow my dreams and has believed in me and supported me through this process.

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I would like to acknowledge my chairperson, Dr. Christian Raby, who has been a consistent source of insight, encouragement, and inspiration through this process. Your words of encouragement lifted me up at times when my patience was tested during the data collection phase of this research. Your thoughtful review of the varied table formats I proposed helped me organize my findings with clarity in a meaningful way. I would also like to acknowledge my certified methodologist, Dr. James Eller. When I took EDUC980 I was still uncertain about my dissertation topic. You met me with many times and through discussion helped me advance a notion into a hypothesis, and finally into a dissertation topic that I was passionate to pursue. Thank you, Dr. Raby and Dr. Eller, for the instrumental role you played in my success.

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List of Abbreviations

Adult Learning Theory (ALT)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Distance Learning Association (DLA)

Distance Learning Consortium (DLC)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Learning Management System (LMS)

Online Distance Learning (ODL)

Sub-Research Question (SRQ)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this proposed transcendental phenomenological study was to specifically describe what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. Online distance learning courses are an accepted form of higher education study yet concerns regarding attrition rates for online distance learning courses are well documented (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). Understanding the factors affecting attrition in online distance learning continues to be an important topic for research (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). Six assumptions of Adult Learning Theory (ALT) (Knowles et al., 2012) were used to frame this study to investigate if strategies employed by these exceptional professors help to mitigate attrition through appeal to adult learners. This topic is insufficiently understood, producing a gap in the current research and providing the basis for this proposed study. Chapter One provides a framework for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. The first component is the background of the problem. It reifies the foundation for this study and explains basic historical, social, and theoretical components. Other components of this chapter will include a problem statement, a purpose statement, the significance of the study, the research questions, and relevant definitions.

Background

Academic success has been related to the experience a student constructs (Vygotsky, 1978). The belief supporting this proposed study is that the individual experience a student constructs is related to the student's perceived level of course relevance, which may influence

the student's satisfaction, learning outcomes, and plans to persist. This belief can be aligned with the six assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). This proposed study will investigate what exceptional professors do to program relevance into online distance learning courses and whether or not these activities align with the six assumptions of adult learning theory. An examination of the historical, social, and theoretical contexts of this problem will be presented next.

Historical Context

Distance learning for knowledge has evolved from tangible correspondence written with intention to educate geographically distant people on a topic in the late 1800s to modern technology-enhanced online learning used by people regardless of geographic location (Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018). According to Vygotsky (1978), human knowledge is not passively absorbed, but constructed from experiences. This constructivist belief surrounding human knowledge supports the need for the experience of some form of correspondence - of communication - between teacher and student to facilitate distance learning. Such communication may be successfully conducted in written letters as was done in correspondence education courses or using technology as is often used today.

Since the advent of distance learning in the late 1800s, there has been concern regarding attrition (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). Distance learning in the form of correspondence schools was elevated from letter-writing in the late 1800s to formalized schools that become popular in the United States in the 1920s and then again after the passing of the GI Bill in 1944 which enabled veterans to attend correspondence schools using their educational benefits (Whitman, 2018). A decade later the Bradley Commission studied the veterans' educational benefits program. In

1951 the Bradley Commission determined, among other things, that 80% of veterans enrolled in correspondence education programs did not complete them and 89.3% of veterans enrolled in for-profit correspondence education programs did not complete them (Whitman, 2018). Two decades later, in 1974, a separate study again noted high levels of correspondence school drop-out, drawing the attention of the Federal Trade Commission and resulting in changes to how veterans were able to use their educational benefits (Whiteman, 2018). Since the 1970s much research has been dedicated to understanding the factors affecting attrition in distance learning. The importance of course design, instructor role, student role, and engagement in distance learning to address temporal and spatial distance have been well documented in the past 15 years (Baggaley, 2019; Holmberg, 2008; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017). In addition, within the past five years, many studies have considered the role student motivation plays in distance learning academic success, with a casual mention of an underlying theme of perceived course relevance (El-Bishouty et al., 2019; Kross et al., 2021; Meikleham & Hugo, 2018; Muir et al., 2019; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Wilson, 2018; Wu, 2016). Although not well studied, the concern with distance learning course content relevance is not new (Muir et al., 2019; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Whitman, 2018).

Social Context

Individual differences, including social and behavioral factors should be considered when evaluating student success and satisfaction with distance learning. Satisfaction is often reported in general terms and frequently associated with motivation, which is often associated with interest in the subject matter itself and the perceived usefulness or relevance of the content (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Eom, 2019; Kross et al., 2021; Wu, 2016). There are positive measures of student satisfaction related to distance learning course content (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Eom, 2019;

Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Stone et al., 2016; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Wu, 2016).

There are positive learning outcomes reported from studies of distance learning (Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Eom, 2019; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Wu, 2016). There are also reports of concern over learning outcomes associated with distance learning (Whitman, 2018). Despite these concerns, proven demand for online courses was demonstrated when schools in all 50 states shifted to 100% online instruction in response to the 2019 novel coronavirus. Concerns about attrition rates in distance learning courses are well documented, even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic disruption (Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, only 41% of students enrolled in college level distance learning courses reported that the quality of the course was better than college-level on-campus, in-person instruction ("Online Education Statistics," 2020).

Theoretical Context

There are many different theories that address the concepts of teaching and learning. These theories often represent varying viewpoints. They may complement or contradict each other or be better suited for specific environments (Schunk, 2020). For decades, researchers have narrowed the scope of these theories to investigate effective teaching practices to understand the behaviors of teachers who successfully produce positive student learning outcomes (Authment & Dormire, 2020; Maulana et al., 2017). Philosophies, including social constructivist theory, differentiated instruction theory, information processing theory, and self-regulated learning theory, have all been connected with and underpin effective teaching practices (Knowles, et al., 2015; Schunk, 2020). Social constructivism holds that individuals create their own sense of reality that is based on their personal experiences (Vygotsky, 1978). Differentiated instruction

evolved from programmed instruction and calls for diverse instructional materials and presentation designed and adapted to appeal to diverse students (Maulana, 2017; Schunk, 2020). Information processing theory addresses how learners respond to novel information and the meaning, importance, and relevance they assign to the information to facilitate learning (Schunk, 2020). Self-regulated learning theory holds that a person will systematically orient their attention and behaviors in order to achieve personal goals (Maulana, 2017; Schunk, 2020).

Each of these theories is strong enough to stand alone to explain effective teaching practices. However, when they are considered in combination, it becomes clear that they underpin the theory of adult learning, which was first developed by Malcom Knowles in 1980. A person's individual construction of course content importance and future applicability, their construction of relevance, will be personal and will be a matter of degree (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). The degree assigned will inform the person's interactions with course content, and it may ultimately affect the perceived level of satisfaction with course content, perceived learning outcomes, and plans to persist. A basic function of human cognition is a personal search for relevance when processing information, and that this function can be exploited with use of ostensive stimuli (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). Students who find course content to be highly interesting and relevant may take ownership of their decision to learn in distance learning courses and ultimately to persist (El-Bishouty et al., 2019; Meikleham and Hugo; 2020; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017; Thompson & Carrier, 2016). This points to the need to understand what ostensive stimuli exceptional professors use to convey relevance into online distance learning courses in a way that appeals to adult learners, which will be addressed by this proposed study.

Problem Statement

The problem is that online distance learning college student retention rates are not improving, and the experiences of successful, exceptional college professors may be overlooked as a source for solutions to this problem (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). In fall 2019, the full-time student retention rate was 76.1% ("College Dropout Rates," 2020). Of the college students enrolled in fall 2019, 36.6% took distance learning courses ("Online Education Statistics," 2020). Factors that affect online student attrition may be related to course design or characteristics of the learners themselves. Students' perceptions of course content relevance may be a contributing factor that influences their motivation to persist in their studies. A better understanding of how exceptional professors convey relevance in online distance learning courses may be useful to mitigate attrition.

Current research related to distance learning attrition rates has primarily been concerned with factors previously associated with student learning outcomes. A mature body of research has examined student satisfaction and motivation, with a frequent focus on engagement and feedback (Camacho & Legare, Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; 2021; Eom, 2019; Martin, et al., 2019; Meikleham & Hugo, 2018; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016). While reviewing this literature, a trend was identified in that some studies noted that students express concern over lack of relevance and a preference for assignments that were authentic (Meikleham & Hugo, 2018; Muir et al., 2019; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Wilson, 2018). Little qualitative research has investigated what a professor actually does to convey relevance to students and how this might influence student satisfaction, learning outcomes, and decision to persist through the course and with their studies. The focus of this

research was to deeply understand what exceptional professors do to convey relevance to students in online distance learning courses. This study sought to identify specific actions that exceptional professors do that convey relevance and to identify if those actions are definable and scalable in a way that could be useful in managing attrition.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. For this research, *relevance* was generally defined as a psychological construct that combines the relationship between an assumption and a context, expressed as a matter of degree (Sperber & Wilson, 1996). The specific description of what exceptional professors say and do to convey relevance was investigated in order to identify patterns or themes of actions that may be useful in the future mitigation of student retention. The theory guiding this study was adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980, Knowles et al., 2012), as it identifies six assumptions of adult learners that can logically be connected to both online distance learners in higher education courses and to the concept of relevance. Adult learning theory does not specifically address attrition, but it does specifically address motivation, which is considered an antecedent to positive learning outcomes (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Keller, 2009; Robinson et al., 2017; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Significance of the Study

This study adds practical, empirical, and theoretical significance to the current knowledge base. It adds to the current knowledge base surrounding effective teaching strategies used in online distance-learning higher education courses. It also adds to the current knowledge base surrounding distance education attrition.

Practical Significance

Research that holds practical significance has impressive results that will be useful by researchers and an academic audience (Mohajeri et al., 2020). This study has practical significance as it will benefit students, professors, and educational institutions. Specific and rich descriptions of what exceptional professors do and say in course design and delivery to convey relevance to students illuminates online teaching best practices and strategies that may have been previously overlooked or discounted (van Manen, 2016). This addresses a gap in the research literature regarding what exceptional professors do to convey relevance in online distance-learning courses. Novel practices and strategies identified through systematic analysis may be used to inform the design and delivery of online distance-learning courses in a scalable way, as the practices and strategies may transcend language and field of study barriers and have use globally (Moustakas, 1994). Deeper and refined understanding of the antecedents of online distance learning student satisfaction gleaned from detailed systematic analysis will be a genuine contribution that may help mitigate attrition, benefiting universities and students (Moustakas, 1994). The results from this study may be used to inform changes to how course content materials are designed and shared with students taking online distance learning courses in order to increase student satisfaction levels and to decrease attrition rates. Finally, this study adds to the literature a curated list of best practices used by exceptional college professors to convey relevance to online distance learners in a way that will appeal to adult learners (Galvan & Galvin, 2017). This list may be of significant value to professors teaching online distance learning courses and to institutions seeking to improve their online education programs.

Deep understanding of what exceptional professors do to program relevance into online distance learning courses stands to benefit students, professors, learning institutions, and the

online learning platform. For the sake of this study, *deep understanding* was generally defined as rich, thick description of salient, important actions taken with intention (Saldana, 2021). As a result of this study, students may get more from their courses and persist to complete degrees. Professors may be better equipped to design and develop online distance learning courses that result in better learning outcomes and that help mitigate attrition. Educational institutions may see improved student retention rates. This study may benefit the online distance learning platform, which has a documented history of concern related to student attrition rates. Finally, it may contribute to and advance the existing body of knowledge related to online distance learning.

Empirical Significance

Empirical significance will benefit the online learning platform. This study adds to the existing body of knowledge related to online distance learning. Considering the challenges online distance learning has weathered in its history, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, specific advice for how to improve online distance learning courses and how to mitigate attrition may be considered of high value (Baggaley, 2019; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Kross et al., 2021; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). This study produced a list of best practices used by exceptional professors that will benefit the online learning platform.

Theoretical Significance

Theoretical significance will be added to the body of research related to adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). This study increased knowledge and understanding of the six assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). This study may also build support for the use of the six assumptions of adult learning

theory in the design and development of course materials used for online distance learning courses. This may improve acceptance and usefulness of adult learning theory by instructional designers and professors. It may also deepen understanding of the theory's assumptions.

Research Questions

There is research on online distance learning courses, on distance learning course design, on use of adult learning theory in online distance education, and on relevance, but there is a gap in research focused on what exceptional college professors do to convey relevance in online distance learning courses. To address this gap in the literature, one research question and three sub-questions guided this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study of the lived experiences of exceptional college professors who program relevance into online distance learning courses. Data collected from the answers to these questions was framed using the six assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). The answers to the research questions are answered in Chapter 4. The data collected during this study was synthesized within the framework of the six assumptions of adult learning theory and discussed in Chapter 5 (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012).

Central Research Question

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who convey relevance in online distance learning courses?

Sub Question One

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who specifically convey that the content in an online distance learning course is relevant to the students in a course?

Sub Question Two

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who engage students in an online distance learning course by attracting and holding student attention?

Sub Question Three

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who link online distance learning course content to student's past, present, or future experiences?

Definitions

1. *Adult learners* – Learners who have an encyclopedia of rich experiences and who are likely to carry additional responsibilities such as dependents or careers while attending higher education courses of their own volition (Diep et al., 2019).
2. *Andragogy* – the art and science of teaching adults (Knowles, 1980).
3. *Asynchronous Learning* – Learning mediated by technology that occurs with geographical and temporal distance; used in this paper to describe a format for classes (Larbi-Siaw & Owusu-Agyeman, 2017).
4. *Attrition* –measured non-completion of a course or educational degree program that presents as a decline when comparing attendance of course completion to course start (Berezytskyi & Oleksyuk, 2016; Berge & Huang, 2004).
5. *Authentic* – A perception that content relates to current problems, personal life, or has practical use *(*Luo et al., 2017; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017).
6. *COVID-19 Pandemic* – Global public health emergency related to the transmission of novel coronavirus. Led to the abrupt closure of businesses and schools, including higher education institutions, in March 2020, with many classes continuing in an online, distance learning format. Globally humans experienced emotional, physical, and economic hardships (Lederer et al., 2021).

7. *Distance Learning/Education* – Situation where the processes of teaching and learning are conducted with temporal and spatial distance between the student and instructor; evolved from correspondence education, and generally accepted to be learning mediated by technology that is offered online via the worldwide web (Holmberg, 2008; Larbi-Siaw & Owusu-Agyeman, 2017; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017).
8. *E-Learning* – generally synonymous for *online distance learning*. Computer-based education that combines the cognitive process for acquiring knowledge with technology tools (typically provided via the internet) to promote learning (Luo et al., 2017).
9. *Extrinsic Motivation* – A type of motivation that stems from an external source (Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016).
10. *Interest* – A psychological construct that focuses cognitive attention (Sperber & Wilson, 1996)
11. *Intrinsic Motivation* – A type of motivation that stems from an internal source(Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016).
12. *Learning* – a cognitive process that results in knowledge; may occur in formal education classes or casually in lived experiences (Aparicio et al., 2015).
13. *Learning Management System* - Delivers content (including assessment) to learners and tracks learner progress while promoting interaction between instructor and student and student to student (Aparicio et al., 2015).
14. *Motivation* – A type or quality of behavior that can be energized, moved, or directed (Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016).

15. *Online Learning* – generally synonymous for *e-learning*. Computer-based education that combines the cognitive process for acquiring knowledge with technology tools (typically provided via the internet) to promote learning (Aparicio et al., 2015).
16. *Pedagogy* – the mechanism that links a learning theory to a learning practice (Aparicio et al., 2015).
17. *Persist/Persistence* – the opposite of dropping out; the intentional decision to continue on with something, such as higher education studies (Stone et al., 2016).
18. *Relevance* – A psychological construct that combines the relationship between an assumption and a context; expressed as a matter of degree (Sperber & Wilson, 1996).
19. *Synchronous Learning* – Learning mediated by technology that occurs from a geographical distance but with no temporal distance. Students and instructors experience in tandem a virtual educational classroom (Fita et al., 2016).

Summary

During this chapter, background for the problem, which is the continuing concern over attrition rates for online distance learning courses in higher education, was provided. Attrition has been related to learning outcomes. Antecedents to learning outcomes include student satisfaction and engagement, and student engagement and satisfaction are related to perceived course relevance. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. The goal of this study was to fill a gap in the research with the curation of a detailed list of best practices used by exceptional professors to convey relevance to online distance learners in a way that will appeal to adult learners. This list

may prove to help professors and institutions design and develop online distance learning courses and programs with reduced rates of student attrition.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. The data collected in this study was analyzed and framed through the lens of ALT. This chapter provides a theoretical understanding of ALT. First, it reviews three types of relevance identified through a review of the literature – content, medium, and temporality. Second, it reviews use of ALT in contemporary learning. Third it covers exceptional teaching strategies, including meeting learner needs, involving students, strategic assessment, and interaction and timely feedback. Finally, the chapter gives an overview of distance learning, identifying teaching strategies used in this platform and attrition concerns. This body of knowledge calls attention to a literature gap that exists related to understanding the specific use of exceptional teaching strategies that effectively convey relevance to online distance learning students.

Theoretical Framework

The importance of the experience a student constructs and how this relates to academic success has been well noted in constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This correlates to the modality of online distance learning, where students often work independently (Decelle, 2016; Inan et al., 2017; Khalid, et al., 2020). The belief supporting this study is that the individual experience a student constructs based on interaction with course content and design will inform that student's perceived level of course relevance, which may then influence satisfaction, learning outcomes, and plans to persist. This belief aligns well with adult learning theory and strengthens the need to understand what a professor can do to design and present course content

to increase student perception of relevance. Research shows that adult nurses who transition best from school to practice setting have been educated in programs designed using constructivist, adult learning theory frameworks (Decelle, 2016). Using the research paradigm of social constructivism, this study used the theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1980, Knowles et al., 2012) to investigate how exceptional professors program relevance into online distance learning courses. Data was framed using the six assumptions of adult learners to confirm or deny that practices of exceptional professors align to the needs of adult learners.

Knowles' Theory of Adult Learning

Adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015) recognizes that adult learners have unique learning processes (Knowles, 1980). Many learners attending online distance higher education courses are age 18 or older (Lewis, 2020). Adult learning theory calls for the use of a method called andragogy to replace the pedagogy used for child learners (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learning theory is underpinned by elements including constructivism, motivation, goal-orientation, and self-regulation (Brieger et al., 2020; Decelle, 2016; Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2015). These underpinnings are organized into six assumptions that differentiate adult learners: (a) need to know (b) learner self-concept (c) experience (d) readiness to learn (e) orientation to learning (f) motivation. The six assumptions of adult learning theory align well with the concepts of relevance and online distance learning, and they overlap contextually with many philosophies, including social constructivist theory, differentiated instruction theory, information processing theory, and self-regulated learning theory (Knowles, et al., 2015; Schunk, 2020). The assumptions of adult learning theory encapsulate and condense these underpinnings into to one useful declarative theory that may be used to direct and inform the design of online distance learning higher education courses

(Arghode et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Decelle, 2016; Roberts, 2019).

Framing this Study with ALT

This study was framed and analyzed using the six assumptions of adult learners. A focus of this study was to identify any relationship that may exist between the strategies used by exceptional college professors and the assumptions of ALT. This study resulted in a list of best practices used by exceptional college professors who convey relevance in online distance learning courses. This list was organized using the assumptions of adult learning theory, positioning it for practical use by instructional designers and professors. By connecting strategies used by exceptional professors to convey course relevance in online distance learning courses to these assumptions of adult learning theory, this study may advance the use of adult learning theory as a tool for instructional design for online distance learning courses to improve outcomes and plans to persist. It also adds to the body of knowledge connecting adult learning theory to online distance learning.

Related Literature

The related literature provides a contextual background for this proposed study. Current and historical research related to relevance, to exceptional teaching strategies, and to distance learning will be synthesized. Relationships between these topics will be identified and considered. This review demonstrates the need for a deeper understanding of what exceptional professors do specifically to incorporate relevance into contemporary online distance learning course design and delivery to promote better learning outcomes and plans to persist in adult learners.

The Importance of Relevance in Teaching

The term “relevance” is used frequently and broadly in education literature. It is generally accepted that there is a strong relationship between contextual effect and perceived degree of relevance (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2017; Keller, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2019; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). It is important to recognize that perceived degree of relevance is a unique personal construct with much space for variability based on personal experience, constructs, and goals (Belet, 2018; Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Braten et al., 2018; Iaconelli & Anderman, 2021; Lewis, 2020; Keller, 2009; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). The positive relationship between student perception of course relevance with engagement, course satisfaction, and achievement has been documented (Belet, 2018; Cheng, 2020; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Keller, 2009; Larbi-Siaw & Owusu-Agyeman, 2017; Rink, 2019; Waheed et al., 2016). Cheng (2020) found that student perception of course content and design was significantly and positively related to student perception of course usefulness, course satisfaction, and plans to persist. Braten et al. (2018) found that student perception of content relevance was directly and positively related to their decision to access and use the content.

To capitalize on this relationship, one must understand the concept of relevance. Braten et al. (2018) defines relevance a scale of perceived practical usefulness that is separate from importance and that is an individual construct. A basic function of human cognition involves an individual’s search for comparative relevance when processing novel information, or inputs (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). This basic function combines assumptions in the mind which include past experiences and phenomena or stimuli in the environment that are manifest to the individual (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Relevance is a matter of degree and can be appreciated as a personal construction that incorporates contextual effects and processing effort (Piaget, 1977; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Inputs that are rated as more

relevant to an individual will produce a positive cognitive effect (Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Communication of important information that should be rated as highly relevant may be achieved through the action of making the information clearly manifest to the audience using an ostensive stimulus (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995).

Antecedents to positive learning outcomes and persistence include student engagement and satisfaction, which are both related to student perception of relevance (Doud et al., 2020; Inan et al., 2017; Keller, 2009; Rabin et al., 2019; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Waheed et al., 2016). This relationship highlights the importance of deeply understanding what professors do to convey relevance to students in online distance learning courses where attrition continues to be a concern (Keller, 2009; Rabin et al., 2019; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Better understanding of the antecedents to positive online distance learning outcomes is important to the health and continued success of this learning platform, which has a history of concern related to student attrition rates (Baggaley, 2019; Cheng, 2020; Holmberg, 2008; Lewis, 2020; Muir et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Rabin et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Waheed et al., 2016; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). Such understanding will also benefit learners, who each individually construct their own level of satisfaction with distance learning courses, which influences their decision to persist with higher education (Holmberg, 2008; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Rabin et al., 2019; Vygotsky, 1978). The level of perceived usefulness of course content and assignments - or relevance - has been noted to be of particular importance when it comes to individuals deciding to continue to use technology such as online distance learning courses (Belet, 2018; Cheng, 2020; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Kross et al., 2021; Lazowski & Hullemen, 2016; Muir et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016).

To increase a student's level of engagement in a course, it is helpful for the student to understand what in the course is in it for them personally (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018; Keller, 2009). The material in a course that resonates with individual students, the course relevance, is often associated with an academic goal, a career goal, or a personal life goal (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018). Students have commented that they find learning activities that help them connect theory and new concepts to practical real-world situations is important to them (Rink, 2019). Material that appeals to certain student subgroups may not connect as strongly with other student subgroups, highlighting that relevance is a personal construct (Belet, 2018; Boda & Brown, 2020; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). The literature shows that course relevance is often defined in terms of content, of medium, and of temporality (Belet, 2018; Boda & Brown, 2020; Braten et al., 2018, Knoster & Goodboy, 2021). There may be other elements related to relevance, but for this proposed study, the literature reviewed was carefully traced to one of these three domains mentioned.

The Importance of Content Relevance

When course content is related to and meets students' academic, career, or personal goals, this is referred to as content relevance (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018). The degree to which students decide information will be useful to them in attaining a goal is the degree of content relevance (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018). When students decide for themselves that there is a high level of content relevance, they are more likely to direct greater attention to the content (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018; Keller, 2009).

The perceived degree of content relevance may be highly variable due to socioeconomic factors and frames of reference held by a student population that is noted to be evolving in level of diversity (Belet, 2018; Decelle, 2016; Woodley et al., 2017). Content relevance may include

subject matter, goals, gender, ethnicity, and class among others (Belet, 2018; Braten, et al., 2018, Hermanns & Keller, 2021; Woodley et al., 2017). When considering the many variables that potentially influence content relevance, including inclusion in school curriculum and ability for students to learn by doing, it becomes clear that this is a vast concept (Boseman & Fernhaber, 2019; Hermanns & Keller, 2021).

Instead of focusing on the socioeconomic differences, which are not controllable, in terms of content relevance it may be more important for professors to focus on what students share in common. What appeals to one diverse student may hold little interest for another unless there is some unifying identifier between the two students, such as a shared academic, career, or personal goal. The literature reviewed related to content relevance is from studies of in-person classes (Braten et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017) and online distance learning classes (Bao, 2020; Larbi-Siaw & Owusu-Agyeman, 2017; Luna & Winters, 2017; Robinson et al., 2017; Thompson & Carrier, 2016;), demonstrating that content relevance exists in both conditions. Braten et al. (2018) found that students were more likely to engage with and use documents when the relevance of the content in the documents was highlighted by the professor teaching the course. Deep understanding of what professors can do to convey content relevance in online distance learning courses could lead to improved outcomes and plans to persist.

The Importance of Medium Relevance

In addition to content relevance, a separate descriptor, medium relevance, has become important particularly for distance learning that is now largely conducted online using a variety of technological tools or mediums (Beard & Konukman, 2020; Boda & Brown, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019). Historically, there was an expectation that based on age alone various

medium formats, such as YouTube video clips, could be used to convey that the subject matter was relevant to individuals of a particular age group (Belet, 2018). Instructors may vary the use of media in online distance learning courses for presentation of novel content, for student interaction activities, and to create authentic assignments (Beard & Konukman, 2020; Boda & Brown, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019).

An award-winning online teacher interviewed regarding use of medium explained that a discussion forum need not only be conducted using the written word, as programs such as VoiceThread enable students to submit discussion forum posts verbally (Martin et al., 2019). This example of successful use of more diverse forms of media demonstrates that there is a wide variety of media available today that some students may perceive as more relevant. Kross et al. (2021) found that the most popular medium for online distance learning was YouTube, followed by Wikipedia and informational articles. Downing (2020) agrees that video remains the primary medium for content delivery but emphasizes that little research supports the effectiveness of video to deliver content. Boda and Brown (2020) found that student perception of relevance could be improved through use of context-specific learning objects created using medium such as virtual reality that can be contextually specific to diverse learners, reinforcing the message of relevance.

The curation and inclusion of a variety of medium types in a course module empower learners with different talents and skills to choose the items most relevant to them to facilitate their learning (Beard & Konukman, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020). Curating such a collection may be a challenge for professors. Student polling and instructor participation in chat rooms and online discussion boards may help instructors identify the mediums most relevant for a particular group of students (Bryson & Andres, 2020). The selection and use of medium types may need to

vary over time in order to remain relevant to the dynamic student body. Deeper understanding of what professors can do to identify and use content medium to generate and sustain student engagement and attention through perception of relevance is worth further investigation (Keller, 2009; Kross et al., 2021).

The Importance of Temporal Relevance

Course content may be linked to students' past, present, or future experiences (Belet, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015). This effective linkage to time frames creates relevance for individuals. It demonstrates to learners that what is being learned has a relationship with their past experiences, and it may help them make sense of their current condition and looming future (Luo et al., 2017; Van Straaten et al., 2015). Employment of a teaching strategy that prompts students to make sense of and to knit new knowledge into their past, present, and future is likely to result in meaningful learning as opposed to rote learning (Jiang et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten, et al., 2015). Much of the literature reviewed was in agreement that making novel information more relevant for students would contribute to better learning outcomes (Belet, 2018; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Luo et al., 2017; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016). Very little of the literature reviewed specifically discussed the use of a teaching strategy employing ostensive use of temporal relevance to improve learning outcomes (Van Straaten et al., 2015), but Luo et al.(2017) observed a participant who commented specifically on the perceived future value of a learning experience. Jiang et al. (2020) stressed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, medical schools that shared frontline worker stories with students noted the students related to the stories as a source of inspiration. Authement and Dormire (2020) stress that the presence of the teacher is fundamental to success

in online distance learning, but do not specifically mention use of teaching strategies that help students connect new material to their past, present, and future.

The research that did mention helping students use novel information to improve understanding of their past, present, and future promoted this approach with intensity (Belet, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015). After reviewing this literature, it is evident that while temporal relevance is valued, it is either not widely and actively used, or has not accurately been reported upon. This points to a need to investigate specifically whether or not exceptional professors who program relevance into course content use temporal relevance strategies to help students learn to apply new information to their personal existence at different points in their lifetime, and if they do, what techniques they use (Belet, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015).

Contemporary Teaching using ALT

Adult learning theory was created by the American educator Knowles in an effort to define and explain significant differences between child and adult learners. Knowles held that teachers needed to understand and respect that adult learners have different learning processes than child learners and required a different approach than children (Knowles, 1980, Knowles et al., 2012). Adult learners are frequently classified by age alone. The Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies classifies adult learners as age 16-25, but then reports data for adults in the age range of 25-65 (NCES, n.d.; Snyder et al., 2019). The comprehensive National Assessment of Adult Literacy also uses the age range of 16-25 (NCES, n.d.). Some researchers further define the beginning of the age range used for adults, up to age 25, as a time of *emerging adulthood,* in appreciation of cortical development that is advanced beyond that of an adolescent, but still developing (Buskirk et al., 2016).

Classifying adult learners based on age alone is controversial because age should not be the sole measure of an adult. Other characteristics of adults include maturity, an encyclopedia of experiences, presence of dependents, jobs, and responsibilities beyond and in addition to attending school (Briegert et al., 2020; Diep et al., 2019). The concept of *adult* can be defined in terms of biology relating to one's ability to reproduce, in terms of psychology relating to one's ability to accept responsibility for oneself, in terms of social position relating to the roles one performs in society, or in terms of legitimacy relating to one's ability to vote, marry, drive a car, etc. (Knowles et al, 2012).

In place of the term *adult*, the term *nontraditional* has risen in acceptance and use in American higher education, as it accounts for characteristics in addition to age (NCES, n.d.). Knowles focused more on the level of maturity and lived experiences in his theory than on the actual age of learners, but he used the term adult to describe learners for his theory, not nontraditional (Knowles, 1980, Knowles et al., 2012). Consistent with his use of the term adult, Knowles used the term *andragogy* in place of pedagogy to reinforce that his theory was different than theories associated with child learning (Knowles, 1980, Knowles et al., 2012).

In contrast to pedagogy – the art and science of teaching children, Knowles (1980) focused on the concept of andragogy – the art and science of teaching adults. Adult learning theory uses the term andragogy to describe the formal approach used when teaching adults. Knowles' approach to andragogy incorporates six assumptions of adult learners and is further defined with four principles (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). The four principles are: (a) adults, since they are self-directed, should have a voice in the process of their learning and content studied (b) adult learning should be designed so that novel information adds to their encyclopedia of experience (c) adult learning concepts should be practical and easy to apply to

real-world issues in their lives (d) adult learning should focus on problem-solving, not rote memorization (Knowles et al., 2012). These four principles are covered in the six assumptions Knowles presents for adult learners: (a) need to know (b) learner self-concept (c) experience (d) readiness to learn (e) orientation to learning (f) motivation.

Use of ALT in Distance Learning

A review of the literature reveals that adult learning theory has previously been associated with distance learning and online distance learning (Arghode et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Decelle, 2016; Diep et al., 2019; Roberts, 2019). Adult learning theory principles have been used to inform instructional strategies and techniques used in distance learning (Arghode et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Decelle, 2016; Diep et al., 2019; Roberts, 2019). The role of the instructor as a supporter, the appreciation that learning is self-directed with influence from prior experiences, and the need for real-world content application are key adult learning theory constructs that have been connected to distance learning (Arghode et al., 2017; Brieger et al., 2020; Decelle, 2016; Diep et al., 2019; Inan et al., 2017; Lewis, 2020; Roberts, 2019). The use of ALT and constructivist frameworks has been demonstrated to successfully prepare adult nursing students for practice (Decelle, 2016).

Knowles' adult learning theory is built upon six assumptions of adult learners: (a) need to know (b) learner self-concept (c) learner experience (d) readiness to learn (e) orientation to learning (f) motivation (Knowles et al., 2012). These assumptions will be explained and related to learners taking online distance learning courses to establish a foundation for this proposed study. These six assumptions will be used to frame supporting research questions, in data analysis, and in data reporting so that strategies used by exceptional college professors that align with Knowles' assumptions of adult learners can be identified.

ALT Assumption 1: Need to Know. The adult learning theory proposes that when adult learners are able to see for themselves firsthand the difference between what they currently know and what they want to know, these learners will organically develop a new need (Knowles, et al., 2012). This new need is the need to know the material that they are now aware of not understanding. Exactly how this need development evolves is not specified. It may vary from learner to learner, and it may vary for learners in online distance learning courses. Waheed et al. (2016) identified five dimensions of knowledge quality for online learners that combine to represent knowledge that is accessible, actionable, and fit for use by the learner. Rabin et al. (2019) found that the fulfillment of learners' intentions was one of two key antecedents to success in massive online courses. Cheng (2020) holds that confirmation of learning expectations is related to student satisfaction and plans to persist. In their review of award-winning online teacher best practices, Martin et al. (2019) stress that when attempting to meet learner needs, teachers need to be conscious of differing needs of adult learners, who are more likely to have full-time jobs that impede on their study time, and who are more focused on identifying upfront what content is most important for them to learn. In short, these award-winning teachers know that online distance learners often search for what they need to know. The literature reviewed does not specify what a professor does to illuminate for a student the difference between what is currently known and what level of knowledge is desired. A stronger understanding of what professors do to illuminate this difference and cultivate the development of "need to know" would be a valuable contribution to online distance learning strategies.

ALT Assumption 2: Learner Self-Concept. Knowles (1980) held that adult learners have matured. They are more independent as students than they were during their youth, when they were reliant on others to tell them what to study, when to study, and how to study. Adult

learning theory embraces the concept that adult learners learn best in independent situations (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). This concept aligns exceptionally well with online distance learning courses, many of which are offered in formats that enable students to log in and work on the content of their choosing at the time most convenient for them (Arghode, et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Diep et al., 2019; Inan et al., 2017). Studies have demonstrated that students taking online distance learning courses are more successful when the students self-regulate their learning (Arghode, et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2017; Diep et al., 2019; Inan et al., 2017).

ALT Assumption 3: Learner Experience. In his theory of adult learning, Knowles (1980) specified that a distinction between adult and youth learners was their lived past experiences and ability to activate these experiences as resources for self-benefit. This assumption is one that can be more directly connected to chronological age, although there can still be variance in experience levels related to socioeconomic and geographic status regardless of age. Diep et al. (2019) and Carter et al., (2017) support that adult learners are less defined by their chronological age, and more by the encyclopedia of experiences that they have accumulated. Learners taking online distance learning courses who have breadth and depth of experience may learn how to activate this experience to their benefit with good instruction (Brieger et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Woodley et al., 2017). Specific details on what to do to encourage online distance learners to access and activate their life experiences are not well covered in the literature, and this topic is worthy of future study.

ALT Assumption 4: Readiness to Learn. Andragogy differs from pedagogy when the learner's readiness to attend classes in order to learn new information is considered. Knowles (1980) declared that adult learners demonstrated an intrinsic desire to learn, as they were

attending classes of their own volition, not because it was a societal norm. Comparisons to readiness to learn can be drawn clearly for online distance education courses offered prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, students enrolled in online distance learning courses by their own choice, indicating that they were ready to learn new materials at their own pace in an online, technology-enhanced environment. During the pandemic, students were denied the choice of learning modality, and students enrolled in online distance learning courses may have been there against their will (Kross et al., 2021). This would affect their readiness to learn. This is not the first time that large groups of students have been placed in online distance learning courses against their will.

Within the literature, Czerniewicz et al. (2019) shared the experiences of the University of Capetown (UTC) which was forced to quickly move all courses into an online distance learning format from 2015 through 2017 in response to student protests that rendered campuses unsafe. UTC experienced difficulty maintaining student engagement during this time related to student activism directly against UTC (Czerniewicz et al., 2019). This may be a unique variation in readiness to learn, but it could be compared to student response to the abrupt change to online distance learning that occurred in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Consistent with the earlier experience of UTC, Gangwani & Alfryan (2020) reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in Saudi Arabia also experienced difficulties in students' readiness to learn. This research may indicate that readiness to learn is not a given hallmark of an adult learner, but instead may be closely related to the choice to learn using a preferred medium or the choice of topic to study. Inan et al. (2017) found that online distance learners who had strong planning skills experience academic achievement and level of satisfaction, and Jiang et al.,

(2020) emphasize that topic studied matters significantly, with high levels of autonomous motivation to succeed in studies noted in the majority of medical students.

ALT Assumption 5: Orientation to Learning. Knowles (1980) held that more mature learners shift their learning orientation from rote memorization of novel subject matter towards the solving of real-world problems. As adult learners perceive course content to be helpful to them in dealing with real-world issues, the adult learner's level of motivation to learn will increase (Decelle, 2016; Jiang et al., 2020; Keller, 2009; Knowles et al., 2012). Issues related to attracting and holding learner attention are well documented (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Keller, 2009; Sperber & Wilson, 1995), and may be magnified in online distance learning courses. Identifying what to do to harness the power of the orientation shift from rote memorization to real-world problem solving could be a strategic tool for use in the development of online distance learning courses that attract and hold student attention.

ALT Assumption 6: Motivation. Knowles (1980) held that in contrast to youth, adult learners were motivated by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, with more emphasis from intrinsic factors. A relationship between motivation and conditions for relevance has been noted to be gradual and related to contextual effect, a personal or intrinsic construct (Jiang et al., 2020; Keller, 2009; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). Stronger understanding of what to do to identify, amplify, and channel the power of intrinsic motivation would be a beneficial tool for teachers designing online distance learning courses, where intrinsic motivation is valued (Bolkan & Griffin, 2018; Keller, 2009; Robinson et al., 2017; Sperber & Wilson, 1995).

Critiques of ALT in Teaching

Critiques of adult learning theory question the attribution of the term andragogy to Knowles, whether the learner assumptions and practices apply to all learners, and whether they

might also benefit children (Arghode et al., 2017; Loeng, 2018). Commonalities in age and other characteristics such as presence of dependents are not enough to justify the statement that all adult learners learn in an identical fashion (Arghode et al., 2017; Diep et al., 2019). Additionally, there may be learners of various ages who benefit from the principles associated with Knowles' adult learning theory (Arghode et al., 2017). A book published by the German educator Alexander Kapp in 1833 covering the teachings of Plato included a separate chapter dedicated to how Plato advised adults should be educated and the word andragogy was used in this book (Loeng, 2018). A separate book, published by Rosenstock-Huessy in 1925, also presented the concept of teaching adults and also used the term andragogy (Loeng, 2018). The literature reviewed thus calls into question the attribution of the concept of andragogy to Knowles alone.

The Importance of Exceptional Teaching Strategies

Strategies used by exceptional teachers, often identified as best practices, have been used since the 1990s to inform course design to result in better learning experiences and outcomes for students (Authement & Dormire, 2020; Bao, 2020; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Downing, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020; Lewis, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Stupnisky et al., 2018). Various professional associations acknowledge faculty with awards for outstanding design and delivery of online distance learning courses (Martin et al, 2019; McGee et al., 2017). The literature reviewed presented various lists of best practices used in online distance education. Synthesis of these lists demonstrated that there was overlap in several of the most popular concepts used: (a) meeting learner needs (b) activities that increase student-to-student interaction (c) varying assessments with a focus on authentic assessments (d) provision of timely feedback and interaction (Acevedo, 2020; Authement & Dormire, 2020; Bao, 2020; Beard & Konukman, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Downing, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan,

2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Lewis, 2020; Martin, et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Mystakidis, 2019; Rink, 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Stupnisky et al., 2018; Van Straaten et al., 2015; Woodley et al.). Each of these concepts will next be considered individually.

The Importance of Meeting Learner Needs

Creating instructional activities that were designed with intention to meet the needs of current learners was a common theme in the literature (Acevedo, 2020; Bao, 2020; Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; Decelle, 2016; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Jiang et al., 2020; Luo et al., 2017; Martin, et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Mystakidis, 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Rabin et al., 2019; Rink, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015; Woodley et al., 2017). Exceptional teachers stress that the teacher is responsible to learn and reflect upon who is registered to attend the course classes, with focus on understanding the personalities of the students so that the course is designed to appeal to all students (Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Woodley et al., 2017). The teacher should then design and adapt the course and contents to meet the needs and respect the diverse talents of all students to promote engagement (Acevedo, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Mystakidis, 2019; Woodley et al., 2017). Camacho and Legare (2021) recognize personalized learning objects as a best practice for online distance education and recommend the use of personalized communication to forge strong connections with students.

Synthesis of the literature on meeting learner needs in online distance learning courses, revealed a theme: meeting the needs of diverse students with diverse needs in an online distance course may be more complicated than meeting these needs in an in-person course. In contrast to this, Cantiello and Hotchkiss (2018) mention that the online distance learning environment may

be better suited to handle specific student needs compared to a traditional classroom environment. Rink (2019) stresses that the issue is not whether we should teach a particular subject, but how it should be taught for the greatest effect. The literature agrees that meeting learner needs should be a focal point. Specific directions for how a professor is to meet the diverse needs of these diverse learners is lacking in the literature. This is an important gap in the literature, as it is generally accepted that when students perceive their needs are met they have higher levels of satisfaction, which is related to motivation, learning outcomes, and plans to persist (Belet, 2018; Cheng, 2020; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Keller, 2009; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Muir et al., 2019; Mystakidis, 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016). In contrast to this, Rabin et al. (2019) found that there is a relationship between meeting learner needs, plans to persist, and learning outcomes, but that student satisfaction may not play a positive role. Rabin et al. (2019) report that students enrolled in challenging courses that call for high investments of effort may not rate those courses as satisfying. This points to a need for deeper understanding of what specific things a professor can do to meet the needs of students in online distance learning courses. The goal of student satisfaction may not be enough. This proposed study would address this need.

The Importance of Student Interaction Activities

The concept that the greatest amount of literature reviewed agreed upon was that there is a need in online distance learning courses for learning activities designed to increase student interactions (Bryson & Andres, 2020; Downing, 2020; Farrell & Seery, 2019; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Lewis, 2020; Martin, et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Robinson et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015; Woodley et al.). Student interactions are multidimensional. They can be defined as interactions

that involve and engage the student with another student, with content, or with the instructor or tutor (Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Robinson et al., 2017). Use of the specific word engagement in relation to student interaction activities was a commonly noted theme in the literature reviewed (Authement & Dormire, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Dorca et al., 2016; Downing, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Lewis, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Woodley et al., 2017). This is important because it is generally accepted that student engagement has a positive relationship with commitment to learning, positive learning outcomes, student satisfaction, and plans to persist (Belet, 2018; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Keller, 2009; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016).). In contrast to this, Kross et al. (2021) found that 88% of the online distance learners they surveyed relied primarily on YouTube videos for online learning, with only 52% relying on course materials and 50% relying on online practice exams. This is of interest as the activity of watching a YouTube video is a solitary practice with little engagement opportunities.

Some of the literature reviewed did provide specific examples of activities that can be incorporated into online distance learning courses to promote student interactions (Camacho & Legare, 2021; Farrell & Seery, 2019; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Woodley et al., 2017). The specific items reported in these studies may not comprise an exhaustive list. An attempt to create an exhaustive list may be futile, as interaction activities should be adapted over time to remain interesting, and relevant to students. For the sake of this proposed study, the interaction activities themselves will not be the focus. Instead, the proposed study would focus on specifically what a professor does to confer relevance onto an activity.

The Importance of Assessment Strategies

There was consistent agreement in the literature reviewed that how professors assess student work matters in online distance learning courses (Acevedo, 2020; Authement & Dormire, 2020; Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; Downing, 2020; Gurjar, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Lewis, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Woodley et al., 2017). Assessment strategies should consider more than just programming variety into assessment format and disclosure of grading rubrics. The literature stressed the concept of developing assessments specifically so that they resonate with real-world situations that students experience (Acevedo, 2020; Decelle, 2016; Farrell & Seery, 2019; Gurjar, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Lee, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Roman et al., 2020; Sweany et al., 2020; Woodley et al., 2017). Acevedo (2020) holds that abstract teaching styles are inadequate when there is a need to interest and motivate students, who may struggle to make connections between course content and real world situations when left to do so on their own. Gurjar (2020) is in agreement with Acevedo and demonstrated that social networks may be useful to facilitate authentic learning through authentic assessments that resonate with students. Roman et al. (2020) stress that authentic assessments have applications across a variety of subjects the student may be studying. Cantiello and Hotchkiss (2018), Decelle (2016), and Lewis (2020) agree that assignments should relate to learning outcomes. Farrell and Seery (2019) stress that authentic assessments such as e-learning portfolios can be used to help students make meaningful connections between what they are learning in class and the real world. Woodley et al. (2017) and Lee (2020) stress that diverse students who engage in course activities, including assessments, that draw upon their prior experiences and cultural knowledge will identify the material as more relevant.

Agreement within the literature demonstrates that assessment strategies should focus on including authentic assessments in online distance learning courses, (Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; Decelle, 2016; Gurjar, 2020; Luo et al., 2017; Miner-Romanoff et al., 2017; Sweany et al., 2020; Woodley et al., 2017). An authentic assessment is generally defined as a situation or activity that closely resembles real-world situations where the course content being learned could prove useful on its own, not just as preparation for the future (Sweany et al., 2020). Logic holds that by definition what is an authentic assessment for one group of students may not be applicable to all groups of students. Lee (2020) cautions that it can be difficult to determine what real world scenarios are meaningful to students. Luo et al. (2017) and Gurjar (2020), agree that there is a diverse nature to assignments that are authentic. The strong agreement within the literature reviewed on the importance of authentic assessments supports the need for research that investigates what exceptional professors do to design and convey assessments that students perceive as authentic (Gurjar, 2020; Sweany et al., 2020).

The Importance of Timely Feedback and Interaction

There was strong agreement in the literature reviewed that a strategy that exceptional teachers use in online distance learning courses is timely feedback and interaction (Acevedo, 2020, Authement & Dormire, 2020; Beard & Konukman, 2020; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Cantiello & Hotchkiss, 2018; Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Goncalves et al., 2020; Gurjar, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Stupnisky et al., 2018). Timely feedback and interaction was generally defined as the provision of quick responses to student email queries and discussion board posts, and grading assignments according to expectations set in the course syllabus. A specific time frame for feedback, such as “within 24 hours” was not generally agreed upon and could be difficult to define specifically. Authement

and Dormire (2020) mention that the Quality Matters Standard 5.3 does not provide a specific time frame for feedback but provides the general guidance to clearly communicate when feedback will be provided to students to set appropriate expectations. The Online Nursing Education Best Practices Guide specifies that teachers should respond to student questions within 24 hours and provide feedback on assignments within seven days (Authement & Dormire, 2020). Gurjar (2020) stood out from the studies reviewed: in-the-moment feedback was provided to students as appropriate through social media and was well-received by students. Goncalves et al. (2020) point out that an obstacle to online distance learning is the reduced amount of interaction between students and teachers. Camacho and Legare (2021) stress that feedback should be personalized in order to strengthen the connection between student and teacher. Cantiello and Hotchkiss (2018) agree with this and posit that the student to teacher relationship can be improved in online distance learning due to the teacher's ability to provide personalized and swift feedback.

The topic, timely feedback and interaction, emerged in the generation of this literature review. The proposed study would investigate how exceptional professors provide feedback and interact with students in a way that conveys and reinforces the relevance of the course content. Some of the literature reviewed revealed that exceptional professors use direct, ostensive statements - sometimes with a temporal element - when communicating with students in order to help students connect course content to the real world (McGee et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2019). This proposed study would further investigate what exceptional professors do to convey relevance with temporality to students, advancing knowledge of this concept.

Online Distance Learning

Distance learning has evolved through five generations from tangible correspondence written in the form of letters with the intention to teach, to radio and television broadcasting of educational courses, to complete courses designed with content offered online via the internet (Camacho & Legare, 2021; Holmberg, 2008; Roberts, 2019; Schorn, 2009). One of the earliest documented forms of correspondence learning is the collection of letters written by the Apostle Paul. These letters included information that Paul wrote intentionally for use to educate his geographically-distant Christian followers (Holmberg, 2008; Schorn, 2009). The Bible refers to Paul's specific intentions that his letters be read and shared so that people would continue their study of and thinking about God (King James Bible, 2017, 1 Thessalonians, 5:27; Colossians, 4:16). Paul was sharing his experience with others through letters in an effort to teach from a distance. He was a pioneer in the field of distance learning, which would blossom with acceptance of an approach where students and teachers write back and forth to each other on a topic of interest. The approach would become known as correspondence education.

Correspondence education courses were first officially offered in 1858 by the University of London, and they have evolved to contemporary web-based instruction that may be offered in synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid modalities (Baggaley, 2019; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Holmberg, 2008; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017). In their essay on adult use of university correspondence courses, James and Wedemeyer (1959) identified this correspondence form of education as one that would play an increasingly important role in education. This viewpoint came to fruition globally during the COVID-19 pandemic, when universities around the world abruptly halted in-person classes, replacing them with the modern form of correspondence learning: online distance learning. In the 1970s, the term, "distance education," came into use to describe these courses (Holmberg, 2008). There was a global surge in correspondence education

offered during the 1970s, with federal taxpayer dollars fueling the growth in the United States (Baggaley, 2019; Whitman, 2018). Many persons of prestige have been educated through distance learning, including Nelson Mandela, Franklin Roosevelt, and Steven Spielberg (Dumbauld, 2015; Roberts, 2019).

Distance learning does not always imply that the learning will occur online (Roberts, 2019). Contemporary online distance learning courses may be offered in synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid modalities (Baggaley, 2019; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Holmberg, 2008; Sutadji et al., 2021; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017). A hallmark of distance learning is the temporal and spatial separation of teachers and students, which sharply contrasts a traditional face-to-face classroom environment (Holmberg, 2008; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). This separation is not changed in the online distance learning environment, although in synchronous online courses teachers and learners have the opportunity to meet virtually at the same time, reducing the temporal, but not spatial, distance (Polakova & Klimova, 2020; Sutadji et al., 2021).

Learner behavior in a distance learning course taught online may be different than learner behavior in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Bawa, 2016; Bao, 2020; Camacho & Legare, 2021; Khalid et al., 2020; Polakova & Klimova, 2020). Khalid et al. (2020) found that online distance learning students demonstrated a greater level of self-directed learning skills than their peers in conventional classrooms. Learners who choose online distance courses have reasons that may be different from students who choose in-person classes, even though the desire to learn is consistent (Bawa, 2016; Holmberg, 2008). This supports that learners should not be placed in online distance learning courses against their will.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, students had the freedom to choose the learning modality that appealed most: traditional face-to-face learning, distance learning, or hybrid

learning that combined the two modalities (Goncalves et al., 2020; Radovan, 2018; Sutadji et al., 2021). This freedom was denied to many during the COVID-19 pandemic (Camacho & Legare, 2021; Goncalves et al., 2020; Radovan, 2018; Sutadji et al., 2021). Proven demand for online distance learning courses was demonstrated globally when schools shifted to 100% online instruction in response to the 2019 novel coronavirus during the COVID-19 pandemic (Camacho & Legare, 2021; Goncalves et al., 2020; Radovan, 2018; Sutadji et al., 2021). This proven demand intensifies the need to better understand and address student retention rates in online distance learning courses. Many models measuring the influence of personal, circumstantial, and institutional factors that might contribute to student decision to drop out of online courses have been developed in response to studies that continue to show that there are benefits from online distance learning (Goncalves et al., 2020; Radovan, 2018).

The Importance of Teaching Strategies in Online Distance Learning

Existing literature shows that the teaching practices used effectively in online distance learning courses are not all novel, but they may differ from those used in traditional face-to-face classrooms (Acevedo, 2020; Bao, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Goncalves et al., 2020; Holmberg, 2008; Martin et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Sutadji et al., 2021). Four key strategies used in online distance learning courses that were identified in this review are: (a) meeting learner needs (b) increasing student interaction activities (c) designed and varied assessment strategies (d) timely feedback (Acevedo, 2020; Authement & Dormire, 2020; Beard & Konukman, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Downing, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Rabin et al., 2019; Woodley et al., 2017). Review of the literature revealed an interesting trend in distance learning courses: best practices commonly call to include assessments that require

students to integrate material learned in class to address a real-world problem (Acevedo, 2020; Decelle, 2016; Martin et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017; Nyland, et al., 2017; Sutadji et al., 2021; Woodley et al., 2017). These assessments were often described as authentic. The characteristics of an authentic assessment include being performance-based and related to complicated real world situations, positioning students to learn to work together and to defend a position, and formative in nature so that students may master novel content while completing the assignment (Sutadji et al., 2021). Authentic assessments are different from traditional assessments, which are typified by tests with multiple-choice, true/false, and short answer questions (Sutadji et al., 2021). An overarching trend revealed through review of the literature is the concept that abstract styles of teaching may be inadequate when it comes to attracting and holding student interest in online distance learning courses (Acevedo, 2020; Holmberg, 2008; Martin et al., 2019). The proposed study would further investigate specifically what exceptional professors do to design and present content so that it is not perceived as abstract.

The Importance of Attrition in Online Distance Learning

Since the advent of distance learning there has been concern regarding attrition (Baggaley, 2019; Holmberg, 2008; James & Wedemeyer, 1959; Muir et al., 2019; Rabin et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). Literature identifying the factors affecting attrition in online distance learning, and the importance of course design, instructor role and student role to address temporal and spatial distance have been well documented (Baggaley, 2019; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). The 1956 Bradley Commission Report and 1955 Census Bureau survey of World War II veterans both reported low completion rates for veterans attending correspondence education courses, with suggestion that the low rate of persistence was related to

the correspondence courses offering education that would be of little subsequent use in landing gainful employment (Whitman, 2018). James and Wedemeyer (1959) studied 55 adult students and 125 high school students, all enrolled in correspondence courses, to investigate factors affecting completion rates. They found that 29% of adult students who did not complete a correspondence course identified "too busy, could not find time" as the reason, and 11% identified "course too difficult, wrong course" as the reason. The phrase, "wrong course" could be interpreted as "irrelevant course." Historically, this indicates that from its early days, distance education has had issues with course content relevance as well as attrition.

A substantial body of information exists on factors associated with student retention along with models and tools to assess, predict, and improve retention rates (Berge & Huang, 2004). This information is generally related to students in traditional, face-to-face classroom environments, and might not be directly applicable to the online learning environment. Factors that affect online student attrition may be related to course design and institutional variables, to circumstantial variables, or to characteristics of the learners themselves. These factors are complex and evolving (Bawa, 2016, Berge & Huang, 2004; Holmberg, 2008; Lewis, 2020). Goncalves et al. (2020) found that students taking online distance learning courses during the COVID-19 pandemic identified excessive workload to be a common obstacle and location flexibility to be a common opportunity.

Retaining students continues to be a challenge in the arena of online learning. According to the National Student Clearinghouse, 16% of students who enrolled in college for the first time in fall 2017 did not persist into fall 2018 (NSC Research Center, 2019). The attrition rate for online learners is higher (Fraser et al., 2018; Holmberg, 2008; Lewis, 2020; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Bawa (2016) calculates online attrition ranges from 10-20% with 40-80% of

online students noted to drop classes. Private, for-profit institutions specializing in online distance learning programs reported declining enrollments from 2014 through 2018 (Downing, 2020).

In 2010 more than 6 million students were taking at least one online course, and that number has been increasing steadily at a rate of 10% per year (Bawa, 2016). Worldwide, 49% of college students had taken an online course in 2018, with the U.S. self-paced online learning market estimated to be worth $15.86 billion in 2021 (Chernov, 2019). Continued interest for online courses as well as demonstrated need for online courses - more than 1,100 colleges and universities in all 50 American states cancelled in-person classes or shifted to 100% online instruction in response to the 2019 novel coronavirus (Smalley, 2020) - should drive the quest to better understand the reasons behind high rates of online learner attrition. Factors that affect online distance learning student attrition may be related to course design or to characteristics of the learners themselves (Holmberg, 2008; Waheed et al., 2016). A better understanding of the factors related to course design that contribute to online distance learning student attrition rates could help mitigate student attrition.

A review of existing literature conducted by Bawa (2016) to explore issues related to online learner attrition and possible solutions, found that social, technological, and motivational issues from the faculty's and the learner's perspectives might affect attrition rates. Key issues related to student dropout rates include misconceptions related to cognitive load, social commitments and obligations, motivational status, technological factors, and faculty proficiency.

A model for sustainable student retention with special attention to online learners was researched and developed by Berge and Huang (2004). This model takes into account institutional, personal, and circumstantial factors individually and in combination. The model can

be used to implement interventions at the student, faculty, program, department, or institutional level. Solutions to reduce online learner attrition suggested include mandatory online orientation programs, social interaction opportunities, collaborative learning opportunities, and enhanced faculty training and support (Bawa, 2016). Better understanding of why online learners leave a course might help with mitigation. Rabin et al. (2019) share that there may not be a relationship between student satisfaction with a course and plans to persist, as challenging courses that require a good deal of effort may not always be found satisfying to a student. Weidlich and Bastiaens (2018) disagree and hold that there is a positive and direct relationship between student satisfaction and plans to persist. This proposed study would provide specific details that could be used to enhance faculty training so that faculty could design online distance learning courses that produce better learning outcomes and student plans to persist. In this way, this proposed study could contribute to and advance the body of knowledge on preventing online distance learning attrition.

The Importance of Learner Characteristics in Online Distance Learning

Participants in online distance learning courses, depending upon their age, socioeconomic status, and interest in technology may be characterized as "digital natives" or "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2012, p. 68). Digital natives are those who grew up using computers and technology such as the internet; most were born in or after the 1990s (Kesharwani, 2020; Prensky, 2012). Use of technology is a rote behavior, a first language for digital natives. Digital immigrants are those who did not have access to technology from birth, and who adopted use of technology later in their lives (Prensky, 2012). It is important to understand the difference between digital natives and immigrants, and to recognize that many current teachers are digital immigrants, and many current students are digital natives (Prensky,

2012). This creates a technological gulf between students and teachers, with immigrants attempting to teach content in an adopted language to natives who own the language (Prensky, 2012).

The technological gulf between digital natives and digital immigrants varies in depth and breadth. Some youth who are expected to be digital natives are noted to have limited adoption of technology, and some elders expected to be digital immigrants are noted to have exceptional adoption of technology (Judd, 2018). Use of the term "digital native" was never as popular as the term "millennial" to describe people born after 1990 (Judd, 2018). Regardless of the terminology, differences in user orientation towards technology and the use of technology in online distance learning exist and should be accounted for when designing effective online distance learning courses.

Summary

The literature reviewed demonstrates that there is understanding of what relevance is, what online distance learning is, and what are the most frequent strategies used by exceptional professors to promote learning in online distance education courses. The quantitative studies reviewed demonstrate that there is a statistically significant relationship between engagement and satisfaction - antecedents to perceived relevance- and learning outcomes and plans to persist (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018; Dorca et al., 2016; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Lazowski & Hulleman, 2016; Luna & Winters, 2017; Thompson & Carrier, 2016; Waheed et al., 2016; Wilson, 2018). The qualitative studies reviewed support the important role perceived relevance plays in engagement, satisfaction, learning outcomes, and plans to persist (Hermanns & Keller; 2021; Martin et al., 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Schmidt et al., 2019; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017). Careful review of the literature was able to draw light to the subtlety that

students prefer assignments that they describe as authentic or relevant (Mystakidis et al., 2019; Polakova & Klimova, 2020; Sweany et al., 2020). But the literature falls short in explaining specifically what a professor can do to convey relevance to students and how this can be done in a way that aligns with the assumptions of adult learning theory. Questions related to what is not known include: How does a student know that course content is authentic? Is there something a professor can do or say that confers relevance onto course content? Is there a way online distance learning courses can be designed in order to harness the power of the assumptions of adult learning theory?

There is a gap in the literature explaining specifically what a professor can do to convey relevance to students, in lectures and in assignments. Simply using a "variety of mediums and a variety of assignments" in order to convey relevance is akin to a buckshot approach: spewing pellets of information in many directions with the hope that one might hit the target. In these times, when professors are being pushed to adapt their face-to-face courses into an online format with little time or experience, and when students taking online courses are frequently choosing to do so because they themselves have other commitments to careers or family or because they have been forced to take an online course against their wishes, there is a need for an approach that has sniper precision. Professors would benefit from ostensive directions explaining what to do to confer relevance onto content and assignments that is provided from the experiences of exceptional professors. Students would benefit from being able to take courses where the relevance of the content and assignments is presented to them in an ostensive fashion, fine-tuning their expectations and increasing their satisfaction, engagement, learning outcomes, and plans to persist. This study offers a major contribution to the literature in the form of a much needed list of best practices organized using the assumptions of adult learning theory. This list is

one that professors and instructional designers may use to infuse relevance into online distance learning courses in a way that will appeal to adult learners, which may help manage attrition rates.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. Deep understanding of what these professors do and say to convey relevance to students may help address the continuing concern over attrition rates for students in online distance learning courses (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). This chapter presents in detail the research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher positionality, procedures, and the data collection plan. The chapter will describe in specific detail the steps taken for data collection from three unique sources and the procedures to analyze and synthesize the collected data. Finally, the chapter addresses how trustworthiness will be established and ethical considerations related to the proposed research study.

Research Design

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses because there has long been concern over attrition in these courses (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). The focus is on the lived experiences of exceptional professors who have been recognized by their peers in the online distance learning industry as being successful at their jobs. This is a qualitative study focusing on gaining deeper understanding of a phenomenon, not a quantitative study that simply confirms the existence of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Qualitative studies are situated in the real world and strive to explore and better

understand the meaning humans convey to experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). The qualitative approach is appropriate because the study is designed to probe deeply in lived experiences to improve understanding with respect for multiple realities that may be discovered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015).

The phenomenological approach is used by researchers who are interested in deeply understanding the lived experiences of others in relation to a specific phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This type of research is qualitative in nature, and it focuses on conscious, direct, lived experiences that may represent multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative phenomenological studies focus on deep understanding of what it is that people do by collecting detailed first-hand accounts of the lived experiences and then thoughtfully analyzing and interpreting these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological method is the appropriate approach for this study because through studying the lived experiences of exceptional college professors who teach online distance learning courses, I will gain a deeper understanding of what these professors actually do to convey relevance (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Phenomenological research is a philosophical approach to understanding that has been used since 1765 and is credited to Edmund Husserl (Giorgi, 2017). The main types of phenomenological study - transcendental, existential, and hermeneutic - differ in their focus (Moustakas, 1994). The focus of transcendental phenomenological studies is narrowed specifically so that it does not include judgement or bias of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental type of phenomenology is unique in that the researcher intentionally sets aside personal presuppositions at the beginning of the study, during a process called “epoche,” to reduce bias (Moustakas, 1994).

The major components of transcendental phenomenology are epoche, reduction, and imaginative variation (Moustakas, 1994). These components are designed to work together in a process that is designed to facilitate the development of thoughts and ideas that will coalesce into knowledge (Moustakas, 1994). The combination of these components into a process is often referred to as the methodology of transcendental phenomenology. The methodology of transcendental phenomenology is appropriate for this proposed study because I wanted to remove, to the greatest extent possible, any personal bias that I may bring into the study as the principal researcher. Personal bias was removed from this study during epoche. Due to my experience as a teacher of online distance learning courses, I have a vested interest in the topic that could also be a source of bias. Choosing to conduct this study as a transcendental phenomenology best positioned me to learn about this phenomenon while keeping my personal opinions separate from the study.

Research Questions

Research questions are written with intention so that they will gather significant information from participants related to their lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Care is taken to write questions that are open-ended in nature, yet directly related to the phenomenon of interest. This study includes a central research question with supporting sub questions designed to gather rich detail from participants.

Central Research Question

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who convey relevance in online distance learning courses?

Sub-Question One

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who specifically convey that the

content in an online distance learning course is relevant to the students in a course?

Sub-Question Two

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who attract and hold attention of students in an online distance learning course?

Sub-Question Three

What is the experience of exceptional college professors who link online distance learning course content to student's past, present or future experiences?

Setting and Participants

The setting and participants rationally selected for this study will be described in rich detail because of their influence on the data collected. Patton (2015) stresses that qualitative research should be descriptive enough to make the reader of the research feel as if they were actually present in the setting. The setting has the potential to compromise the results if it is not natural and not related to the phenomenon of interest. Moustakas (1994) stresses that the participants must be willing to participate and must have experienced the phenomenon to be studied. If the participants selected have not authentically experienced the phenomenon, the results may be compromised. With respect to the importance of setting and participants, each will be chosen rationally and without bias.

Setting

This phenomenological study required inquiry in a natural setting. Participant interviews to gather insight into lived experiences were conducted to deepen understanding. The setting for this study was the American field of higher education. For this study, "higher education" was generally defined as classes, courses, or study programs taken after completion of grade 12, which may result in a degree or certificate (Mittelman, 2018). While online distance learning

courses are offered to younger students, this study used adult learning theory as a framework, which supports the decision to focus specifically on only the higher education realm. The rationale for extending the setting for this proposed study to a country-wide level was to draw the most holistic picture of the phenomenon possible and to align with the awards programs used to recognize exceptional professors, which open their competitions globally (Guest et al., 2013). The awards programs used are identified in this study using pseudonyms. In keeping with recommendations for qualitative research, which is not intended to generalize, detailed information about the participants was collected as the participants emerged in the course of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The first awards program included in the study frame is identified for this study using the pseudonym, "Distance Learning Consortium" (DLC). The DLC is a global organization focused on identifying and driving best practices for high quality online learning experiences (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021).This organization evaluates the quality of online learning experiences through the framework of learning effectiveness, faculty satisfaction, student satisfaction, scale, and access (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021a). The DLC board of directors, who governs the consortium, is composed of a combination of educators and former corporate leaders, with 81% of board members holding a doctorate degree (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021b). The DLC has been recognizing outstanding online educators with awards annually since 2001(Distance Learning Consortium, 2021c). Awards conferred by the DLC are overseen and directed by the DLC Nominations, Awards, and Recognition Committee. DLC Awards include the DLC Effective Practice Awards, the Bruce N. Chaloux Scholarship for Early Career Excellence, and the Digital Learning Innovation Award (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021c). Specific criteria for DLC awards is documented (Appendix Q). The DLC initiated a

fellows program in 2010 to further recognize DLC members with professional distinction for their work promoting high quality online education (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021c). The DLC Board of Directors confers fellowship (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021c). DLC annual membership fees range from free community memberships to $175 professional memberships (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021d). Institutional memberships are also offered, with pricing relative to size (Distance Learning Consortium, 2021d).

The second awards program included in the study frame is identified for this study using the pseudonym, “Distance Learning Association” (DLA). The DLA was founded in 1987 with the goal to ally together powerful resources to support the development of effective distance learning programs for use in education, higher education, and military and government training applications. (Distance Learning Association, 2021a). The DLA is governed by a governing board, an executive committee, and an elected president (Distance Learning Association, 2021a). The governing board is described as intentionally diverse with 48% of board members holding a doctorate degree (Distance Learning Association, 2021b). The DLA has been recognizing exceptional distance learning educators with awards since 1999 (Distance Learning Association, 2021c). Awards conferred: 21st Century Distance Learning Award, Outstanding Leadership Award, Innovation Award, Excellence in Teaching/Training Award, Global Impact Award, Student Achievement Award, Quality Research Paper Award (Distance Learning Association, 2021c). The DLA Board of Directors also nominates and elects individuals into the DLA Hall of Fame (Distance Learning Association, 2021c). Specific criteria for DLA awards is documented (Appendix P). DLA annual membership fees range from $30 for students to $125 for individuals (Distance Learning Association, 2021d). For-profit and non-profit organizational memberships are also offered (Distance Learning Association, 2021d).

Participants

Participants in this study are college professors who teach or who previously taught online distance learning courses in the United States of America who have been recognized as exceptional at this work through receipt of an award. These professors must speak enough English in order to participate in an interview conducted in English. The age of the participants will be greater than 18, and the age was expected to be less than 70. Specific demographics of the participants will be discussed in detail in chapter four. These participants volunteered their time for this study, and they were not compensated in any form.

Researcher Positionality

This study was planned to be a transcendental phenomenological study. This design was selected because I am interested in understanding deeply the lived experiences of exceptional college professors who program relevance into their online distance learning courses. I wanted to learn specifically what these professors do and how they do it in order to convey relevance to students. It is important to me that the people I interviewed for this study have actually lived the experience of teaching an online distance learning course that professional peers hold in high esteem. For this reason I have chosen the phenomenological approach. It is also important to me that I withhold my personal opinions as much as possible, as I am a college professor with less than five years' experience. For this reason I have chosen a transcendental approach. I sincerely believe that this approach and formal study design positioned me to best collect and analyze data related to the phenomenon of interest so that I could produce results including a list of best practices that will prove to be of use to others.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework, or research paradigm, that guided this study is social

constructivism. I chose this framework because it holds that people may have different experiences, even in similar situations (Vygotsky, 1980). This concept resonates with me on a personal level. I believe that people do construct their own experiences, which are influenced by their history, their beliefs, and their expectations. Using this paradigm, I appreciated that different participants in this study may construct different experiences, and that each expressed experience is valid and worthy (Vygotsky, 1980).

Philosophical Assumptions

In this section I will address three philosophical assumptions - ontological, epistemological, and axiological- which inform a researcher's study from the formation of the problem statement to the writing of research questions, and ultimately, the interpretation of results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Explaining my position in relation to these assumptions will give you deeper insight into my personal values and belief systems. This is important because my beliefs will influence this study as I was the sole instrument used to evaluate data for this study. Regardless of how well I may practice epoche, it is important to understand that assumptions I hold led me to want to conduct this study, and these assumptions will influence the study.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption focuses on a person's beliefs on the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is associated with the reporting of the different experiences of individuals, which may reflect different realities as reported by those people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This aligns well with social constructivism and with my personal point of view. I believe that people construct their own personal sense of reality based on their history, their station in life, and their goals. Conscious of this, I believe that I was able to appropriately

report the different views of their reality that participants shared in this study.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption focuses on knowledge. What counts as actual knowledge, how knowledge claims may be justified, and the relationship between the researcher and the subject researched fall within the epistemological assumption (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While I have some experience as a college professor teaching online distance learning courses, my experience counts for less than five years, and I do not yet consider myself on expert on the topic. I used a transcendental approach for this study and practiced epoche in order to manage my personal knowledge and relationship to the subject researched. To justify knowledge claims and account for the subjectivity natural to qualitative research, I chose to define the sample pool for this study in a way that others have previously validated the subject matter knowledge of the participants. I sincerely believe that this design positioned me to best collect and analyze data related to the phenomenon of interest.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption focuses on how a researcher's values are identified and brought into a study in order to manage bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a college professor who teaches online distance learning courses, I have a passion to see these courses designed and developed properly so that the field of distance learning will thrive. I am unapologetic about my belief that distance learning holds value for current and future learners. I am also conscious of this belief and I share this information so that those who read this dissertation understand a bias I hold and may read this study effectively. I practiced epoche to isolate my personal values so that I could objectively collect and interpret data for this study.

Researcher's Role

I have a strong personal interest in understanding what highly regarded and successful professors say and do to convey relevance to online distance learning students because I teach these students myself. This personal interest reinforced the need for this study to be qualitative in nature, as I wanted to deeply understand this phenomenon and desire to be the human instrument of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). My drive to better understand this phenomenon made me a strong instrument of inquiry able to record and respect multiple realities discovered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It is important that the people I interviewed for this study have actually lived the experience of teaching an online distance learning course that professional peers hold in high esteem because naturalistic inquiry suggests that realities must be considered and understood in context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason, I have chosen the phenomenological approach. It was also important that I withhold my personal opinions as much as possible, as I am a college professor with less than five years' experience and I was the human instrument of inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this reason, I have chosen a transcendental approach. This naturalistic approach and formal study design positioned me as the human instrument to best collect and analyze data related to the phenomenon of interest so that I could produce results including a list of best practices that will prove to be of practical use to others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As the principal investigator in this study, it was important for me to be attentive, responsive, and protective of the needs of study participants and to practice epoche myself accordingly. I used the technique of epoche to isolate myself and to identify and separate my personal experiences, notions, and biases from this study (Butler, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As an adjunct professor experienced teaching online distance education courses, I do have preconceived assumptions about what constitutes relevant course content,

design, and learning objects. I have not applied for, been nominated for, or been recognized with an award for online distance learning course design and development through the DLC, the DLA, or any other organization. I isolated myself in the practice of epoche through use of memoing techniques to record any personal experiences, past knowledge, and personal biases throughout the course of this study. If at any time during the course of his study I became conscious of a personal bias or preconceived notion, I did memo the experience.

I appreciate that achieving a state of pure epoche may be impossible, and that it was a process that I engaged in throughout the course of this study in order to remain as objective as possible (Butler, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). For the past seven years I have practiced Bikram yoga. This form of yoga is very specific. The same 26 postures and two breathing exercises are conducted in the same order every class in the same environment, which is a room heated to 105 degrees Fahrenheit with 40% humidity (Bikram, 2000). The only thing that varies from class to class is the person doing the postures and the person teaching the class. Students do not speak in Bikram yoga classes, they listen. The teacher does not call postures by name, but instead gives concise directions, such as to lock your left leg at the knee, contract the left quadricep, and then lift your right leg with the knee bent. The goal in a Bikram class is to follow the specific directions from the teacher at the exact time in order to stay in sync with the other students. The longer one practices Bikram, the more familiar one becomes with the sequence of postures, and the more likely one is to stop listening to the teacher and move on the next anticipated posture before the other students. When I practice Bikram yoga, before the class I clear my mind of all expectations and make a concerted effort to not anticipate what will happen next, but to just move my body as the teacher calls for the movements. I believe that this experience is similar to the process of epoche. I used my experience clearing my mind for Bikram yoga when I practiced

epoche for this study in order to remain fully present, with as little bias as possible. When I wrote the final report for this study, I included all information that had been isolated during epoche to fully disclose my biases and how they may have influenced the study results and assertions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In addition to practicing epoche, as the principal investigator in this study I must recognize that I am the sole instrument that was used not only to collect data, but also to analyze and synthesize it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to be a finely tuned and appropriate instrument, I needed to commit myself to becoming and maintaining my status as an instrument that was effective for this specific work (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As the human instrument I recognized that since this study was conducted in a natural setting, uncertainty was to be expected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To handle unpredictable situations that may arise during the course of this study I needed to be alert and quick thinking, responsive, adaptable, and able to identify and appreciate the phenomenon of interest itself, and as part of the larger world in which it has context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Procedures

In this section, the planned sequence of steps used for this study will be described in detail. The level of detail provided will be sufficient that future researchers could replicate the study. This section will describe necessary site permissions, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), participant solicitation, data collection and analysis plans by data source, and an explanation of how the study will achieve triangulation.

Permissions

Permissions were garnered from the DLC, the DLA, and the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection for this study. The DLC and the DLA

are gatekeepers to databases of exceptional college professors who teach online distance learning courses. Express permission was obtained from the DLC and the DLA to confirm that I may recruit potential participants for this study from their pool of past award winners. Neither the DLC nor the DLA have a formal approval process for contacting their members. I emailed the appropriate contact person at each organization, explained the nature of this proposed study, and requested permission to recruit participants from each organization. The DLC and the DLA confirmed verbally their interest in participating. Once I received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (Appendix A), I sent them the recruitment information (Appendix C, Appendix D, Appendix E, Appendix F) which they will then sent out to their list of past award winners. Email confirmation to participate from each organization (Appendix B) serves as granted permission. After these permissions have been granted, which secures the setting for this study, the next step will be to obtain IRB approval from the university supporting this study, Liberty University.

Liberty University uses the Cayuse system, and requests for IRB approval were submitted electronically using the appropriate forms (Appendix A). Proof that I have completed human subjects training through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) is included with the IRB approval forms so that I could position myself as the principal investigator for this study. The electronic submission via Cayuse for a new human subjects research study application was submitted with at least one month's time for a full review. This study involved no more than minimal risk. The goal was to complete this study within one year of receiving IRB approvals. No changes were requested by the Liberty University IRB. Upon receipt of IRB approval, I began the process to recruit participants. This process is explained next in the Recruitment Plan.

Recruitment Plan

Once an appropriate topic and research question are solidified, the researcher will locate and select participants (Moustakas, 1994). Considering that the underlying goal is deep understanding of lived experiences, the identification and selection of participants is critical to this form of research. Ethical principles related to work with human subjects are observed and formal IRB approval (Appendix A) is recommended and will be secured prior to the collection of any data related to this proposed study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007). For this study, potential participants were identified and recruited with purpose to enroll participants that can best share rich and unique perspectives while demonstrating the entire range of possible variation to help me develop a deep understanding of how these participants experience the phenomenon of programming relevance into online distance learning courses (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007, Patton, 2015). Moustakas (1994) holds that the criterion for participant selection is the shared experience of the phenomenon of interest. By carefully defining the setting for this study, I can assure that the participants have the shared experience of teaching online distance learning courses in a way that has been recognized as exceptional by objective, professional peers. These participants will not constitute a vulnerable population. They will be 18 years of age or older.

The sample pool that was used to draw the purposeful criterion-based sample for this study was exceptional college professors who teach online distance learning courses in the United States of America. This sample pool was gathered using criterion to create intensity sampling (Patton, 2015). Intensity sampling strategy produces a sample group of people who have lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest and who can be a rich source of information (Patton, 2015). This group of individuals was selected based on the research objective of this study (Guest et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). For the purposes of this study,

"exceptional" will infer that these professors have been acknowledged for their work teaching online distance learning through the receipt of an award from a formal organization dedicated to the research and practice of teaching distance courses using technology that qualify the course as online. Researchers have previously documented that award-winning teachers demonstrate high levels of thinking sophistication, effectiveness achieving desired learning outcomes, and sense of agency to influence others (Gan Joo Seng & Geertsema, 2018; Martin et al., 2019). The rationale for selecting award-winning professors is that the organizations conferring the awards have already vetted the work of the professors, compared it to a peer group, and determined it to be superior.

The sampling frame for the pool is the global organizations that have a formal structure as indicated by a governing board of directors, and that recognize exceptional college professors who teach online distance learning courses (Guest et al., 2013). This frame is wide enough to allow for cultural, contextual, and social complexities in online distance learning courses that may exist to be observed (Guest et al., 2013). From this frame, a purposive sample was selected in order to include participants who meet the criteria for this study and who have the lived experience of teaching exceptional online distance learning courses in the United States of America (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Gall, 2007; Guest, et al., 2013, Patton, 2015).

Every effort was made to construct a sample that is heterogenous in regard to gender, age, and ethnicity, with a goal to achieve maximum variation on these demographics (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Guest, et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). It was anticipated that based on the sample frame, the predicted age range for participants will be greater than age 21; the minimum age requirement for participation will be 18. Participant identity is held confidential and protected through use of pseudonyms Based on recommendations for phenomenological research enough

participants were interviewed to reach data saturation, which occurs when the interviewing of additional participants reveals no new information (Moustakas, 1994). Successful phenomenological research has been conducted with as few as one and as many as 325 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dukes (1984) holds that a sample of three to 10 participants may prove adequate. Moustakas (1994) recommends a minimum sample size of 10 participants to obtain thick descriptions of lived experiences from various viewpoints. Hays and Singh (2012) advise the qualitative researcher to focus less on the sample size and more on achieving the stated purpose of the study and an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest. Patton (2015) stresses that qualitative research focuses on small samples that were selected with purpose to position the researcher to probe deeply into the topic of interest by being able to interact with people who are rich sources of information informed by their lived experiences with the phenomenon of interest. Considering these points of view, an initial sample of 10 participants, in accordance with Moustakas'(1994) recommendation, was studied. If saturation was not achieved, additional participants would have been recruited until saturation had been achieved.

American award winners from the DLC and the DLA were initially contacted via an email (Appendix C), which was sent to the award winners directly through their appropriate organization, the DLC or the DLA. The email sent to potential participants included the title of the study, a brief description of the study (Appendix E), a call for participation, and links to the screening survey (Appendix D) and the consent form (Appendix F). The screening survey confirmed participants meet qualification, collected simple demographics including age, gender, teaching institution, and years' experience teaching, and included a link to the consent form, which included a more detailed description of the research which explains the three types of data

I intended to collect. Upon submission of the completed, qualifying screening survey and the signed consent form, the participants were directed immediately to an online, electronic portal where the potential participant could upload or type in their personal teaching philosophy statement.

To promote responses to the email campaign to recruit participants, the initial message was requested to be distributed strategically on a Tuesday afternoon at approximately 2 PM, when people are likely to be looking for a distraction from their daily routines (Ellering, 2021). The subject lines were written to attract attention using "you/your" language and previewed on multiple devices such as phones, tablets, and computers to confirm that the words that fill the preview space convey critical information (Marrs, 2021). Multiple subject lines were composed using language that reduces bias (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Marrs, 2021). Potential participants who do not respond to the initial email should receive the original email again, but distributed with a different subject line (Marrs, 2021). The original email sent using the alternate subject line was requested to be strategically distributed on a Thursday afternoon at approximately 2PM during the first week of recruitment, and then once per week until a large enough sample had been obtained, but not longer than eight weeks duration (Ellering, 2021).

In the event that a large enough sample was not obtained through the email campaigns or maintained through the study, a snowball sampling approach was to be employed. This form of purposeful sampling is based on asking participants already enrolled in the study to recommend people they know who meet the criteria to join the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Participants garnered through snowball sampling efforts would be sent an email from me via my Liberty University email account that includes the title of the study and links to the consent form which includes a description of the research, and the consent form.

All participants included in the study were assigned pseudonyms and organized into a computerized, password-protected database (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All files and work related to this study were stored in password-protected computer files. Within the database, participants are organized alphabetically and then assigned a pseudonym used throughout the study in order to protect identity.

Multiple sources of evidence were collected in this study in an effort to bolster construct validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected from teaching philosophy documents, personal interviews with participants, and through observation of recorded video lectures. All data was collected in the English language. These three sources of data were triangulated to corroborate the evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). Triangulating data from the results of the teaching philosophies and interview responses with their actual actions as analyzed through their demonstration in their recorded video lectures enabled me to weave an in-depth and contextual study of exceptional college professors' experience of programming relevance in a natural setting (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection Plan

Data is collected for a transcendental phenomenology in a planned and disciplined manner (Moustakas, 1994). Collecting data from multiple sources will position a researcher to triangulate the data, which validates findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, Gall et al, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Three forms of data were collected and analyzed for this study: documents, interviews, and observations. These multiple forms of data were organized, analyzed to transform data into concrete findings, and triangulated to synthesize and validate findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007, Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015).

Data for this study was collected from documents, interviews, and observations. All data collected was stored in password-protected files in order to protect and preserve participant identity (Yin, 2018). Data was uploaded into the Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS), NVivo 13, for in-depth analysis. Participant identity was protected with use of pseudonyms. Patterns and themes were noted and synthesized as appropriate. Data from documents, interviews and observations were triangulated using pattern-matching logic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation of this data could reveal different views of what is happening that may be complementary or contradictory (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The intentional order of data collection was sequenced so that teaching philosophy documents were collected first, interviews were collected second, and observations were conducted third. All documents were collected in electronic form; no paper or hard copies of data were collected. Data from the teaching philosophy documents was assigned to unique pseudonyms assigned to each participant and uploaded into NVivo for storage and in-depth analysis. Participants who submitted a teaching philosophy were then contacted for interviews and to collect artifacts for observation. Additional data from interviews and observations was connected to each appropriate pseudonym for analysis.

This sequence allowed me to best engage with the participants during the interviews. By first reviewing the participants' teaching philosophies, during the interviews I was able to explore their experiences more personally and engage the participants using excerpts from their teaching philosophies to prompt them as needed (van Manen, 2016). This sequence intentionally positions observations as the final data point to be collected. This enabled me to focus my

observations selectively, so that I could deepen my understanding of the phenomenon and of novel themes that have emerged during the course of the study (Gall et al., 2007).

Documents

Document analysis is the careful review of public and private records (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For qualitative research, documents can be a rich source of words used by the participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; van Manen, 2016). The documents collected and reviewed were the personal statement of teaching philosophy of exceptional college professors. The teaching philosophies were accepted as a primary source of data in document form, as they were in the rich, detailed, actual words of the potential participants. Van Manen (2016) holds that written lived experience descriptions can be a valuable source of data for qualitative research. Teaching philosophies were selected for review because they summarize in one to two pages, a teacher's knowledge and use of learning models and methods as well as the teacher's pedagogical beliefs (Merkel, 2020). Gan Joo Seng and Geertsema (2018) agree with Merkel (2020) that teachers' knowledge and beliefs, their conceptions of what it means to teach, is an important aspect of teachers to recognize.

Participants were instructed to submit their teaching philosophies as an attachment when they responded to the recruitment email. It was anticipated that most participants would attach a file that is formatted in Microsoft Word or in Apple Pages. I work on an Apple computer system that also is equipped with Microsoft Word, so I was able to open and read either version. There was also the possibility that participants may attach a pdf file or may simply type their philosophy directly into the email response, but this condition did not materialize. All information received was uploaded in NVivo. If necessary, text received in an email was copied and pasted into a Word document and then uploaded into NVivo.

Document Analysis

For this study, I used the modified van Kaam method to analyze all data, including data collected from personal documents. This method is one of two recommended for the analysis and synthesis of data in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). The modified van Kaam method systematically walks a researcher through seven steps of data analysis to ensure that the data is analyzed and synthesized effectively (Moustakas, 1994). All documents were uploaded into NVivo and associated with the correct pseudonym. Due to the naturalistic nature of the documents collected - the personal teaching philosophies - coding technique was used to achieve reduction (Hays & Singh, 2012). Coding technique is the creation and application of a short word or phrase, a "code" to data segments in order to assign a value to the specific unit of data (Saldana, 2021). The size of a data segment coded can vary from a single word to a page of text or a snippet of recorded video that may span seconds or minutes (Saldana, 2021). To facilitate proper coding, a coding protocol (Appendix K) was written so that codes were clearly understandable and used with precision. A code book (Appendix L) was created and updated as new codes emerged during the data collection, analysis, and synthesis. The code book explains codes to represent content relevance, medium relevance, temporal relevance, and the six assumptions of ALT (need to know, learner self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, orientation, and motivation). It was anticipated that additional codes would emerge during analysis and synthesis.

Within NVivo, each document was coded and analyzed using the steps of the van Kaam method and the techniques of epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. I used a document analysis protocol (Appendix M) to analyze one document at a time, beginning with epoche. Upon completion of epoche, I then began the process of reduction, using the coding

protocol and the code book with allowance for identification of additional emergent codes. Every expression that is meaningful to the lived experience was identified and counted (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2021). As appropriate, new codes were added to the code book. The expressions that emerged were identified as possible horizons (Moustakas, 1994).

Once the document had been coded and possible horizons identified, I then tested each possible horizon to confirm that it was unique and necessary (Moustakas, 1994). Each possible horizon was considered to confirm that it contained an important aspect of the lived experience and that it could be abstracted and labeled (Moustakas, 1994). If this was achievable, the possible horizon was identified as an actual horizon. I then organized the horizons into clusters based on commonalities (Moustakas, 1994). Commonalities may be related to the content, medium, and temporal aspects of relevance, to the six assumptions of ALT, or to other emergent notions. These clusters of horizons became recognized as the core themes of the document (Moustakas, 1994). I then checked the core themes of the document back against the complete document to confirm that each theme was expressed clearly in the document or was compatible with the document (Moustakas, 1994). If this was not true, the theme was marked as invalid, and was moved into a separate file in NVivo labeled, “Invalid Themes.”

For the document, I then constructed an individual textural description of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). A textural description is a complete accounting and explanation of what constitutes a conscious experience (Moustakas, 1994). I used direct quotes from the document to provide thick, rich description that includes feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I then employed imaginative variation to construct an individual structural description of the document (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I constructed a textural-structural description of the document that focused on gleaning meaning from the document (Moustakas, 1994). I completed

this process for each document to understand what the documents contain and to reconcile how it was analyzed.

When all documents were completely analyzed individually, I then constructed a composite description of this lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This composite description should be representative of all the documents collected, a synthesis of the data. Throughout this entire process I memoed as needed and identified personal observations with "OC" in NVivo. Information gleaned from the document analysis was used to inform question 10 in the interview, which addressed the participant's teaching philosophy.

Individual Interviews

The foundational data for phenomenological research is garnered during the long interview (Moustakas, 1994). The long interview is designed to be interactive, using pre-written open-ended questions in a guide (Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Open-ended questions are used in order to gather more detailed information than a mere yes or no answer would provide (Stake, 1995). These questions should be adapted and followed up as needed in order to probe deeply into an experience, which requires the interviewer to listen well and remain focused on the larger purpose of the study (Gall et al., 2007). Best practices include beginning with a brief socialization to relax the participant and gain trust (Gall et al., 2007). The interview was selected as a primary method of data collection for this proposed study because Moustakas (1994) holds that this form of data is key in transcendental phenomenological research. Other researchers concur with this approach (Stake, 1995; van Manen, 2016; Yin, 2018). I will follow an interview protocol (Appendix G) to prepare for and conduct each interview.

Participant interviews were conducted to address the central research question: to deepen understanding of what exceptional college professors do to convey relevance in online distance

learning courses. The standardized open interview approach using a predetermined list of questions (Appendix I) that were read sequentially to each participant to minimize the possibility of bias (Gall et al., 2007). A semi-structured interview format was used. An interview guide of questions (Appendix I) directed the sequence and wording of interview questions that are asked to each participant, but I did ask additional questions as appropriate in order to explore an answer and to gain a deeper understanding of what the participant is experiencing. Research holds that strong and insightful interview questions are not always planned in advance, but emerge during the course of research (Moustakas, 1994; Stake, 1995). Care was taken through the interviews to manage the development of reflexivity, and I used memoing technique prior to and after interviews to bracket personal bias (Yin, 2018).

Personal interviews with participants were scheduled at the convenience of each participant and conducted via a scheduled and recorded Zoom teleconference call. All interviews were conducted in the English language. Participants were interviewed one time each, using the same series of open-ended questions (Appendix I) to guide the interview. Each participant was required to have their personal web-enabled camera on during the interview so that their body language and facial expressions are observable. I had my web-enabled camera on during the interviews so that the participants were able to see me. I asked each participant a series of organized, planned questions (Appendix I) designed to explore deeply how and why the participants experience course content (Moustakas, 1994; Yin, 2018). The intent was to progress through the questions sequentially.

Should a participant's response illuminate a related topic of interest, additional questions emerged and were asked. Additional questions may either refocus the participant, or they may be intended to probe deeper in a response that was general in nature. Questions to probe more

deeply into an experience may ask the participant to share an example or to explain that the experience was like or what they were feeling at the time (van Manen, 2016).

The interviews were scheduled to last 60-90 minutes but may run longer or shorter based on participant responses. In addition to recording the video with audio through Zoom technology, a secondary audio copy of the interview was conducted using Evernote technology on a separate recording device, an iPhone dedicated to this purpose. All copies of interviews were stored in password-protected files.

Interview questions have been reviewed by the chairperson and the certified methodologist involved with this study in order to confirm that the questions are understandable, bias-free, and would collect data that will prove to be useful. Interview data collected that proves to be skimpy or vague may be useless (van Manen, 2016). The interview questions were reviewed by experts in the field of online distance learning to first address clarity. Revisions were be made as needed.

Each interview was transcribed using a professional transcription service. The transcription and the original recordings were uploaded into NVivo for analysis. All files are password-protected and associated to the appropriate participant pseudonym.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please describe what you did that positioned you to earn an award for online distance learning. CRQ

2. Please describe what you do to gain and attract student interest in the online distance learning courses you teach. SQ1

3. Please describe what you do to gain and attract student interest in assignments which are included in the online distance learning courses you teach. SQ1

4. Please describe what you do to convey to students that the content in the course is important for them to learn. SQ3

5. Please describe the mediums you use for learning objects (for example: YouTube videos, Google Forms Quizzes, etc.) and what you do to select these mediums. SQ2

6. Please describe what you do to help students connect the information they are learning to their past and present experiences and to their future goals. SQ3

7. Prior to this interview you shared a copy of your personal teaching philosophy. Tell me about this philosophy of yours. CRQ

8. Where did your teaching philosophy come from? CRQ

9. How has this philosophy changed over time? CRQ

10. Explain to me how you use this philosophy to guide your teaching. CRQ

11. We have covered a lot of ground in our conversation, and I so appreciate the time you've given to this. One final question …Have you heard back from prior students who indicated that the content they learned in your classes later proved to be helpful to them in their lives? If yes, would you be willing to share contact information for these students? SQ3

12. Would you be willing to share with me a recorded lecture that you made for your students during the time that you were considered for the award that you won? CRQ

The first interview question was a "grand tour question" designed to establish rapport and ease the participant into conversation while also gathering information that will be used to describe the case in thick, rich detail (Gall et al., 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). This question is considered non-threatening. The information gathered from this question may help reveal more fully the essences and meanings of the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). This information further defines the experiences shared as being those of real

people with their own particular experiences and may generate additional questions (van Manen, 2016). Questions two through 12 were designed to better understand what the experience of programming relevance into online distance learning courses is like (van Manaen, 2016).

Question two was designed to gather information to address the CRQ. This is the first question that attempts to begin to understand the lived experience of the award-winning professors being interviewed in this study (Gan Joo Seng & Geertsema, 2018; van Manen, 2016). This is the first time that the participant was being asked to reflect. The question is general by design since subsequent questions will delve into more specific aspects of the phenomenon. This planned cadence of questions was intended to gather information about the whole of the phenomenon of interest first, followed by parts of the phenomenon of interest in other questions (van Manen, 2016). Several studies suggest that teaching practices used in online distance learning courses may be different from strategies used in traditional classrooms (Acevedo, 2020; Bao, 2020; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Holmberg, 2008; Martin et al., 2019; McGee et al., 2017). Questions seven, eight, and nine address SQ1 and the concept of content relevance.

Question three was designed to gather information to address SQ1. This question is more specific than question six and is intended to gather details from a specific aspect of the lived experience from award winning professors (Gan Joo Seng & Geertsema, 2018). These details can be used to gather meaning, and they may contribute to the construction of essences (van Manen, 2016). A positive relationship has been documented between perception of course relevance and student engagement, course satisfaction, and achievement (Belet, 2018; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Keller, 2009; Larbi-Siaw & Owusu-Agyeman, 2017). This question was written to help illuminate what these exceptional professors do in order to convey to students that the content in the online distance learning course is relevant (Gan Joo Seng &

Geertsema, 2018). Follow up questions may emerge here based on the answers provided by the participants.

Question four was designed to gather additional information to further address SQ1. This question focuses in on part of the phenomenon of interest: relevance of assessment strategies (Acevedo, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; van Manen, 2016; Woodley et al., 2017). Several studies stress that assessments which resonate with real-world situations that students experience are valued as more relevant (Acevedo, 2020; Krishnan et al., 2019; Martin et al., 2019; Woodley et al., 2017). This question was intended to illuminate what these exceptional professors do to convey to students that assignments are relevant. Woodley et al. (2017) stress that connecting authentic assignments to real-world experiences is highly important for diverse students. With its more specific focus, this question will keep the participant engaged and reflecting upon their lived experience in varying degrees. It also sets the stage for the next question, which is the first question to use the term, "important" in relation to course content. Follow up questions may emerge here based on the answers provided by the participants.

Questions five and six gathered specific information about parts of the SQ1 and lead the interview to question seven, which was designed to gather details regarding the whole of SQ1 (van Manen, 2016). This is the first question to use the word "important." By design, none of the interview questions use the term "relevance." Studies show that the perceived relevance of course content and assignments has been noted to be of particular importance when it comes to individuals deciding to persist (Belet, 2018; Eom, 2019; Eom & Ashill, 2016; Knoster & Goodboy, 2021; Lazowski & Hullemen, 2016; Muir et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018; Stone et al., 2016; Wu, 2016). This interview question was specifically designed to gather details about what exceptional college professors do to convey relevance of course content to their students.

Follow up questions may emerge here based on the answers provided by the participants. Although not threatening, question nine is heavy, and will be intentionally followed by a lighter question that redirects the focus of the participant to SQ2.

Question eight was designed to gather details related to SR2. The answers to this question will include specific learning objects, some of which may even be tangible. The items that constitute the answer to this question may intensify the essences identified in this study of lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). The answers to this question should be quite specific, with less room for interpretation, for a YouTube video is just that, a YouTube video (van Manen, 2016). Several studies suggest that the variety of medium used to deliver online distance learning courses has, in itself, relevance (Beard & Konukman, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019). Belet (2018) explained that historically there was an expectation that age correlated to acceptance of medium choice for learning objects. Martin et al. (2019) demonstrated that for a single assignment, such as an online discussion, various forms of media could be used to complete the assignment, which if harnessed would empower students to select the medium most relevant to them. Studies support that the curation and inclusion of a variety of mediums in a course may position learners to choose the items most relevant to them based on their talents and skills (Beard & Konukman, 2020; Bryson & Andres, 2020). Question nine was intended to generate deeper understanding of what exceptional professors do to select, implement, and present learning object mediums to students. Follow up questions may emerge here based on the answers provided by the participants.

Question 10 was intended to gather details related to SQ3. Asking questions that illuminate what the actual lived experience is like differentiates phenomenology from other forms of qualitative research (van Manen, 2016). This question digs deep into what these

professors have actually accomplished. Researchers have previously connected perception of course relevance to experiences that can be framed by time (Belet, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; van Straaten et al., 2015). van Straaten et al. (2015) hold that helping students understand how course content is related to their past experiences, current situation, and future goals is an important aspect of teaching. Schmidt et al. (2019) concur, emphasizing that by helping students connect what they are learning to their temporal experiences and future goals is more likely to result in meaningful learning as opposed to rote memorization. This question was designed to gain insight into specifically what exceptional college professors do in order to help students connect novel information to their personal experiences and future goals. I was prepared to ask follow up questions based on the answers provided by the participants in order to learn more about what these professors have done to connect course content specifically to student past experiences, current situation, and future goals. I was particularly attentive to the three temporal frames: past, present, and future. I was interested to see if the professors addressed these time frames specifically in their experiences teaching.

Questions seven through 10 were designed to follow up and gather additional information and deeper understanding of the document that the participants previously provided as part of this study. The document shared, a personal teaching philosophy, may have deep meaning and significance to the participants (van Manen, 2016). In order to better understand significance of this document, questions seven through 10 were asked. Based on answers provided, additional questions may emerge. Question seven is general. It was intended to open the conversation widely so that the participants may freely share their experiences and feelings about their personal teaching philosophy. Question eight probes to learn if the teaching philosophy has roots or inspiration of significance. Question nine investigates the life of this document, probing to

understand if the document has been modified through use, and if so, why. Question 10 probes into what the participants use this document for in their lives.

Question 11 was designed to gather information which may reinforce and validate that what the professor did was effective in conveying relevance. Research supports that exceptional teachers use interaction in online distance learning courses (Acevedo, 2020, Beard & Konukman, 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2019; Gangwani & Alfryan, 2020; Martin et al., 2019; Panigrahi et al., 2018). I was hopeful that the participants in this study would be willing to talk in detail about their experiences.

Question 12 was the closing question and was intended to garner the third piece of data for this study, the video lectures. These lectures were observed for additional analysis. I believed it was appropriate to ask for this information at this stage in the process, as rapport has been developed. Asking now also reduced the amount of additional time that the participants needed to invest in the study.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

In transcendental phenomenology, long interviews are accurately transcribed and organized for in-depth analysis (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, I used the modified van Kaam method to analyze all data, including data collected from interviews. The modified van Kaam method is one of two recommended for the effective analysis and synthesis of data in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). All interviews were professionally transcribed using a paid transcription service offered by NVivo. Transcription is the capturing of all spoken words and converting them to the written form (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Professional transcriptionists are able to reduce the speed of a recording in order to produce an accurate record of spoken words (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). It is estimated to take four hours to

transcribe one hour of conversation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this reason, each interview was sent out for transcription within 48 hours of completion in order to maintain momentum during this study. Each transcribed interview was emailed to the appropriate participant for validation of accuracy. Once validated, the interview was uploaded into NVivo and associated with the correct participant pseudonym.

Within NVivo, each interview transcript was analyzed using the seven steps of the van Kaam method and the techniques of epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. I analyzed one transcript at a time, beginning with epoche. Upon completion of epoche, I then began the process of reduction, using the code book (Appendix L) with allowance for identification of additional emergent codes. Every expression that is meaningful to the lived experience was identified and counted (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2021). As appropriate, new codes were added to the code book (Appendix L). The expressions that emerged were identified as possible horizons (Moustakas, 1994). Once the interview has been coded and possible horizons identified, I then tested each possible horizon to confirm that it is unique and necessary (Moustakas, 1994). Each possible horizon will be considered to confirm that it contains an important aspect of the lived experience and that it can be abstracted and labeled (Moustakas, 1994). If this is achievable, the possible horizon will be identified as an actual horizon.

I then organized the horizons into clusters based on commonalities (Moustakas, 1994). Commonalities may be related to the content, medium, and temporal aspects of relevance, to the six assumptions of ALT, or to other emergent notions. These clusters of horizons become recognized as the core themes of the interview (Moustakas, 1994). I then checked the core themes of the interview back against the complete transcript of the interview to confirm that each theme is expressed clearly in the interview or is compatible with the interview (Moustakas,

1994). If this was not true, the theme was marked as invalid, and moved into a separate file in NVivo labeled, “Invalid Themes.” For the interview, I then construct an individual textural description of the experience, using direct quotes from the interview (Moustakas, 1994). I then employed imaginative variation to construct an individual structural description of the interview (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I constructed a textural-structural description of the interview. I completed this process for each interview.

When all interviews had been completely analyzed individually, I then constructed a composite description of this lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This composite description should be representative of all of the interviews conducted. Throughout this entire process I memoed as needed and identify personal observations with “OC” in NVivo.

Observations

Observation is the study of actual behavior. Observation has disadvantages including the potential for people being observed to modify their actions if they are aware they are being observed, or to selectively influence how they are perceived by others (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Gall et al., 2007; Patton, 2015). Observation differs fundamentally from recollections of experiences. Recollections or reflections are given to personal interpretation and transformation (van Manen, 2016). Observations are a preferred form of data when the researcher is most interested in what has actually occurred is or is occurring, not in what the participant reports occurred (Hays & Singh, 2012). Benefits of observations include the opportunity for the researcher to develop a better understanding of context, they position the researcher to gather primary details about setting, they position the researcher to gain insight into aspects of the experience that the participant may have forgotten or not been willing to share, and they may illuminate participant bias (Patton, 2015).

For this study, observation of recorded lectures by the exceptional college professors was completed. The study of material culture or artifacts including art is an acceptable form of data collection for qualitative research (Gall et al., 2007l van Manen, 2016). My role was that of complete observer, as I was independent from the setting (Gall et al., 2007). Having previously completed the documents review and personal interviews, at this stage in the data collection I was able to focus selectively on aspects of the phenomenon, and on themes that have emerged (Gall et al., 2007). As the lectures observed were recorded, there was no need to schedule formal observations. The frequency of the observations was planned to be one lecture per participant. The lecture observed should have been delivered by the professor during the time frame when the professor was honored with the award. The length of the lecture should be a minimum of seven minutes and not more than 60 minutes in duration.

Participants were asked to share a recorded video lecture near the conclusion of the personal interview. They were given clear instructions on how to share the video through email either as an attachment or as a link. The participants were clearly instructed to send a pre-recorded class lecture that includes only footage of the professor and that does not include any student names or faces. If they choose to share a link, they were instructed to include the password if the video is password-protected. It was anticipated that most participants who provide an attachment of a recorded lecture will use one of these formats: MP4, MOV, WMV, or AVI. It was anticipated that participants who provide a link to a published version of the lecture on a video sharing service will send a link to sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, or DailyMotion. I was prepared and able to open and view all appropriate attachments, and also able to access published videos, provided that passwords are provided if they are necessary. All files were uploaded into NVivo for analysis.

The interview concluded with me thanking the participant for their time and explaining what happens next. I explained to the participant that I would follow up this interview immediately with a "Thank you" email that includes a reminder to send a link to a recorded lecture. I explained that the interview, which was recorded, would be kept in a password-protected file which will be destroyed after three years. I explained that the interview would be professionally transcribed, and that a copy of that transcription in Microsoft Word format would be emailed from me to the participant so that they could check the transcription for accuracy in a "member check" (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). I explained to them how to make changes to the transcript using the comments feature in Microsoft Word. I requested that they return the approved and commented file to me within five days.

Observation Protocol

Prior to conducting observations, I took care to isolate myself in the process of epoche and used the observation protocol (Appendix J) that I developed for this proposed study in order to focus my attention so that I would see and hear the experience and write descriptive notes (Patton, 2015). The goal of the observations was to provide thick, rich descriptions of the setting and experience (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2015). The observation protocol was designed to focus my attention on the phenomenon of interest prior to beginning observations so that I did not just watch the video lectures, but instead focused on the specific setting characteristics and behaviors (Hays & Singh, 2012; Patton, 2015).

I was certain to have the time and space to watch each lecture through to completion without interruption. I did take field notes as I observed the lectures. These field notes are descriptive, detailed, and concrete. If appropriate, I included any sketches that I may have drawn during the observation in the field notes. The field notes include descriptions of the participants,

descriptions of the setting, accounts of events, and descriptions of my behavior (Gall et al., 2007; Hays & Singh, 2012). In addition, I also made reflective comments in the field notes. These reflective notes, identified as "Observer Comments (OC)," may include my personal frame of mind, emerging interpretations, ethical dilemmas, subjective impressions, initial analytic notes, and my opinions (Gall et al., 2007; Saldana, 2021). The field notes, including descriptive and reflective data, are password-protected and stored in NVIVO, correctly identified with the pseudonym for each participant.

During observation I was mindful that the objective of this activity is to orient the research to the phenomenon of interest (Hays & Singh, 2012; van Manen, 2016). I was observing with the goal to better understand what exceptional college professors have actually done in their recorded lectures that demonstrates conveyance of relevance to students in online distance learning courses. I was observing to better understand the nature of what these professors actually did in their lectures. For this study, nature was generally defined as the essential features, the meaning of lived experiences (van Manen, 2016). In the observation of these lectures I was able to systematically describe the structures that occur in these lived experiences from the viewpoint of an objective observer (van Manen, 2016).

Observations Data Analysis Plan

For this study, I used the modified van Kaam method to analyze all data, including data collected from observations. The modified van Kaam method is one of two methods recommended for efficient analysis and synthesis of data in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Observations were my objective review of recorded lectures using the observation protocol (Appendix J) that were provided by the participants. All observation data

including the observation protocol worksheet was uploaded into NVivo and associated with the correct pseudonym.

Within NVivo, each observation protocol worksheet was analyzed using the steps of the van Kaam method and the techniques of epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. I analyzed one observation protocol worksheet at a time, beginning with epoche. Upon completion of epoche, I then began the process of reduction, using the code book (Appendix L) with allowance for identification of additional emergent codes. Every expression that was meaningful to the lived experience was identified and counted (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2021). As appropriate, new codes were added to the code book (Appendix L). The expressions emerged were identified as possible horizons (Moustakas, 1994). Once the observation protocol worksheet had been coded and possible horizons identified, I then tested each possible horizon to confirm that it was unique and necessary (Moustakas, 1994). Each possible horizon was considered to confirm that it contains an important aspect of the lived experience and that it can be abstracted and labeled (Moustakas, 1994). If this was achievable, the possible horizon would be identified as an actual horizon.

I then organized the horizons into clusters based on commonalities (Moustakas, 1994). Commonalities may be related to the content, medium, and temporal aspects of relevance, to the six assumptions of ALT, or to other emergent notions. These clusters of horizons become recognized as the core themes of the observation protocol worksheet (Moustakas, 1994). I then checked the core themes of the observation protocol worksheet back against the complete observation to confirm that each theme was expressed clearly in the observation or is compatible with the observation (Moustakas, 1994). If this was not true, the theme was marked as invalid, and was moved into a separate file in NVivo labeled, “Invalid Themes.” For the observation, I

then constructed an individual textural description of the experience, using direct quotes from the observation (Moustakas, 1994). I then employed imaginative variation to construct an individual structural description of the observation (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I constructed a textural-structural description of the observation. I completed this process for each observation.

When all observations were completely analyzed individually, I then constructed a composite description of this lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). This composite description should be representative of all of the observations conducted. Throughout this entire process I memoed as needed and identified personal observations with OC in NVivo.

Data Synthesis

In a phenomenological study, data is organized and then analyzed and synthesized using the techniques of epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). In transcendental phenomenology, these four techniques are completed using one of two methods: the modified van Kaam method or the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. It is not the method selected, however, but the technique of epoche that differentiates a transcendental study.

Epoche

A mark of distinction between transcendental phenomenology and other research models is the systematic and disciplined approach that this model requires for the study and the collection of data. This disciplined and systematic approach process, called epoche, intentionally separates preconceived ideas, opinions, and judgements of the researcher from the study (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of epoche is to liberate the researcher to conduct the study with absolute naivety regarding the phenomenon being studied. Epoche is a formal and absolute first step when conducting a transcendental phenomenological study. Epoche begins when the

researcher discloses personal experiences and feelings related to the phenomenon studied in an effort to reduce bias (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of epoche is for the researcher to see things absolutely as they truly appear, with no judgement or preconceptions. For example, a vegetarian conducting a transcendental phenomenological study about dietary protein would have to release all judgement and preconceptions related to consumption of meat in the process of epoche in order to conduct a proper transcendental phenomenological study.

During the course of this study I practiced epoche . While epoche is the formal first step of a study (Moustakas, 1994), I practiced epoche at the beginning of the study as the very first step, and then again prior to each interview, and prior to data analysis and synthesis. This planned repetition was intended to help me separate any preconceived ideas from the work that I was about to do for this study. I used memoing technique as a main strategy during epoche. In these memos (Appendix H) I wrote answers to a series of questions to clear my mind of suppositions, judgement, and preconceptions that I may have in order to mentally prepare myself to be an appropriate, non-biased data collection instrument (Moustakas, 1994). The goal was to attain a state of transcendental ego that is absolute and pure (Moustakas, 1994). At the conclusion of this study I reviewed my own memos to identify patterns that may be synthesized into themes. Identified themes may have impacted or biased my work. Said themes would be synthesized and disclosed.

Memoing

Memoing is the writing down of ideas and thoughts that emerge during the different phases of a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Memoing is similar to journaling. I used memoing techniques to record any personal experiences, past knowledge, emergent ideas, and personal biases throughout the course of this study. If at any time during the course of his study I

became conscious of a personal bias or preconceived notion, I wrote down the experience in a memo. I used memoing during the epoche phases of this study to bracket myself (Moustakas, 1994). I wrote memos using the medium most appropriate to the moment. Microsoft Word documents, emails, text messages, hand-written notes, and voice messages may all have been employed for the purpose of memoing throughout the course of this study. All memos were properly captured, transcribed if appropriate, and uploaded into NVivo. As appropriate, when memoing during analysis, my thoughts were noted as "observer comments" (OC). In this final report for this study, I have included information that has been captured in memos to fully disclose my thoughts and biases and how they may have influenced the study results and assertions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenological Reduction

This second step in the methodology is used to describe the essences related to the phenomenon. These essences have emerged during the collection of data related to the phenomenon of interest (Moustakas, 1994). Each emergent essence has value and is described in rich detail. This rich detail should include textural qualities that describe the quality of the experience using words that describe the experience in degrees (Moustakas, 1994). These textural qualities describe what was being experienced by the participants. Writing the reduction is an iterative process that begins with a pre-reflection on the data that has been witnessed and evolves until the data is reduced into themes and a wide view of the phenomenon, known as a horizon (Moustakas, 1994).

A hallmark of phenomenal analysis is the equal weighting of all data during reduction so that horizon statements emerge in a process called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher next identifies meaning units from the collection of horizon statements (Moustakas,

1994). These meaning units are then clustered into themes; during this process repetitive data is identified and accounted for, condensing the data (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then writes rich, thick, textural descriptions of the phenomenon, which is a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). In order to describe and equally weight the initial data and identify essences, coding will be used.

Coding. Data collected was uploaded into NVivo 13 for in-depth analysis using codes. A code is generally defined as a short phrase or single word that that represents salient data (Saldana, 2021). Coding was conducted in two cycles with the first cycle focused on analyzing the data using holistic and provisional coding techniques, and the second cycle focused on synthesizing the data (Saldana, 2021). Codes were emergent, but an effort will be made to use structural coding technique (Saldana, 2021) to code content based on its relationship to relevance as content, medium, or temporal. To identify emergent codes with appropriate focus, as I considered the data I did refer to my research questions and theoretical framework, using a coding protocol (Appendix K) (Saldana, 2021). As appropriate, in vivo coding technique was used to capture precise language used by participates that further illuminate their experiences (Saldana, 2021). Magnitude coding was used as appropriate to track frequency and intensity of participant opinions (Saldana, 2021). Frequency data was collected for words, word pairs, and codes, with refinement of tentative codes as the study progresses to produce codes that best condense, distill, or summarize the data (Saldana, 2021). A complete list of codes with descriptions was created and maintained in a codebook (Appendix L). After the data had been organized into codes, the codes were analyzed and organized into groups to achieve horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994).

Imaginative Variation

After the essences were described in rich detail, imaginative variation was used to harness the power of the imagination, memory, and sense. This power was used to inform and develop a structure that explains how the essences relate to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The structure that was developed explains how the experiences of the participants relate to the phenomenon of interest. There are four steps to conducting imaginative variation: (a) systematic variation of meanings underlying textural meanings (b) recognition of underlying themes central to the phenomenon (c) consideration of universal structures that precipitate thoughts about the phenomenon (d) search for examples that confirm that themes and structure identified (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation is a form of intentional thinking, and it is informed by noesis and noema. Noesis is the subconscious thoughts and perceptions that ultimately bring ideas into consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). The complement to noesis is noema, or the actual physical experience (Moustakas, 1994). The textural descriptions were considered with imaginative variation, synthesized, and finally structures emerged (Moustakas, 1994).The structures and textural descriptions were then considered together to further illuminate the phenomenon.

Modified van Kaam Method

In transcendental phenomenology data is organized for in-depth analysis, which is completed using the modified van Kaam method or the modified Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method (Moustakas, 1994). Both methods employ the four techniques of epoche, reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis. For this study, I used the modified van Kaam method to analyze the data collected.

This method consists of seven data analysis steps: (a) list each important expression, then group the expressions into horizon statements (b) Test each of the expressions identified to determine if it contains a necessary moment and if such moment can be abstracted and labeled (c) Cluster and organize constituents into core themes of the experience (d) Check the core themes against the complete record of data for each participant to see if they are expressed explicitly or are compatible. If not, delete the theme (e) Using the themes identified, construct an individual textural description that describes the experience for each researcher (f) Using the themes identified and imaginative variation, construct for each researcher an individual structural description of the experience (g) For each participant, construct a textural-structural description of the experience that includes meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). These seven steps were completed for each of the three streams of data collected: documents, interviews, and observations. After this analysis was completed, I synthesized and triangulated the data. Data was analyzed in the order it is collected: documents first, interviews second, and observations third. After each of these three data streams was analyzed, the data was synthesized through triangulation, which is discussed in detail in the Trustworthiness section of this paper.

Memoing technique and epoche were used throughout the study to inform me and the audience for this study of any personal biases that I may bring to the research and concluding assertions. Memos were organized by data and by topic for the ease of sorting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Topics used to organize memos included but were not limited to data phase segment, data type (document, interview, observation), synthesis (captures ideas that cross or synthesize information), demographics, and personal bias. As appropriate, tables or matrices were created in order to identify and address emergent trends and patterns (Patton, 2015).

When all data including epoche memos was analyzed using the van Kaam method all of the data was then triangulated in order to synthesize the data. Themes that emerged in document analysis were compared and considered for synthesis with themes from interviews and observations. Themes that emerged in interview analysis were compared and considered for synthesis with themes from documents and observations. Themes that emerged in observation analysis were compared and considered for synthesis with themes from interviews and documents. Themes that emerged in epoche memo analysis were compared and considered for synthesis with themes from documents, interviews, and observations. During final synthesis, connections were made, or not made, between the themes from the three streams of data and from my personal epoche experience. It was anticipated that the final synthesis will identify a single set of common themes that appeared in all three streams of data and possibly also in my epoche memos. These common themes were then considered in terms of how similar and how different they may be. Of interest were common themes that complement each other as well as common themes that contradict each other in regard to content, medium, and temporal aspects of relevance, to the six assumptions of ALT, or to other emergent notions. Of interest also was any personal bias themes that emerged during analysis and synthesis of epoche memos that may have affected this study or its results.

At the conclusion of data synthesis, I composed a composite description that represents the sampled population's lived experience of what to do in order to convey relevance in online distances learning courses in a way that appeals to adult learners (Moustakas, 1994). This composite description uses thick, rich description and addresses the central research question for this study. I also composed a composite list of best practices used by exceptional college professors. This list answers specifically sub research questions one, two, and three for this

study. This list may be a practical tool that others may use to improve their online distance learning courses. Together, the composite description and list of best practices constitute a body of evidence that answers this study's research questions and that adds to the body of research related to online distance learning and to the body of evidence related to ALT.

The preliminary results of analysis and conclusive composite description and list of best practices were subjected to external auditing prior to presentation and formal review of this dissertation. External auditing was performed by a certified research methodologist trained in transcendental phenomenology who serves on the Liberty University dissertation committee. Based on feedback from this expert audit, additional time might have been invested in data collection, analysis, or synthesis in order to strengthen findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the validity and worth of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A rigorous study has a high level of trustworthiness. The credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of this study contribute to and create a sense of trustworthiness for this proposed study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of this study have been carefully planned and will be explained next. These measures were taken to assure that a rigorous study has been completed following the recommendations of Lincoln and Guba.

Credibility

The credibility of a study refers to how accurately and truthfully the study presented real world situations and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study with high credibility is one that can be used with confidence as a reference by other professionals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is earned through a variety of techniques (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). The techniques used in this study included prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, and member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Prolonged Engagement

Prolonged engagement is the investment of an appropriate amount of time by the researcher in order to fully understand the scope of the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study to attain a state of prolonged engagement I scheduled personal interviews so that there is ample time for the interview to endure for a longer period of time than anticipated. Questions asked of participants in the interview were written using language that is bias-free, appropriate, and gathers information that proved to be useful (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). As appropriate, I asked emergent questions during interviews to probe into novel concepts, clarify ambiguities or distortions of data, or deepen understanding (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). If needed, a follow up or continuation of the interview was scheduled in order to gather answers to all questions and to achieve prolonged engagement.

Persistent Observation

Persistent observation is the researchers commitment to remaining focused on the phenomenon of interest during periods of engagement in order to deeply understand the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to achieve a state of persistent observation, I prepared myself for interview through epoche and by setting myself up in an environment where I could give my undivided attention to the participant in the interview. I used the interview questions to guide the interview, but I did interject additional questions as appropriate in order to gain deep understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the intentional use of a variety of data sources in a study so that the researcher can fully and completely understand the phenomenon of interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study data collected from three sources was triangulated in order to link together multiple sources of evidence in order to build out rich, detailed understanding of lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). Three data sources have been identified for this study because one source alone is not enough for a researcher to use to adequately understand a phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The three data sources that were triangulated were documents, interviews, and observations. I compared these data sources against each other to identify commonalities and ambiguities in order to better understand the phenomenon of how exceptional college professor program relevance into online distance learning courses. I used methods triangulation, which compares data across sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). If new concepts emerged, other forms of triangulation may have been used.

The data collected was synthesized and triangulated to identify common themes and patterns across data streams and relationships that may exist (Patton, 2015). Triangulation is the use of multiple forms of data to confirm findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Triangulation can occur across data streams, participants, researchers, units of analysis, or theoretical perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). Several forms of triangulation exist: fair dealing, unit of analysis, data methods, and theoretical perspectives (Hays & Singh, 2012). For this study, I triangulated data using the "fair dealing" approach and the "triangulation of data methods" approach. Should it emerge that other methods should be employed as well, other methods would have been employed as well. Fair dealing is the synthesis of data from participants that share a common perspective or

characteristic (Hays & Singh, 2012). It was anticipated that participants would share characteristics that emerge during analysis and prime them and their data for fair dealing triangulation in regard to the content, medium, and temporal aspects of relevance, to the six assumptions of ALT, and to other emergent notions.

Triangulation of data methods is the synthesis of multiple data streams (Hays & Singh, 2012). It was anticipated that during analysis, common themes may emerge that appear in more than one stream of data, and these themes are prime for triangulation of data methods analysis. Triangulation of data was conducted in effort to inform the lived experiences of the participants as they relate to the central and sub-research questions, as they relate to the six assumptions of ALT, and as they relate to novel themes that emerge during analysis.

During data triangulation attempts were made to identify patterns between interview question responses, the teaching philosophy document review, and actions demonstrated through observation of course video lectures to deepen understanding of the professors' experience programming relevance into in an online distance learning course and how the actions taken may or may not appeal to adult learners (Patton, 2015).

Member Checking

Member checking was used so that participants can review interview transcripts and confirm or deny that the data collected is accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Member checking is the intentional confirmation and validation of data that has been collected by participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Member checking may include the asking of additional questions in order to clarify ambiguities, deepen responses, or fill in research gaps that have emerged (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Member checks

will be used in this study to confirm that the data collected during interviews was not misinterpreted or taken out of context and to address any additional emergent questions.

Having participants review and respond to informed consent forms ensures that the people participating understand exactly what they are signing up to do, what any possible side effects might be, and what steps they may take at any point to drop out of the study with no repercussions. This process increased the reliability of the study because it ensures that the researcher and the study are compliant with federal regulations written to protect human subjects from harm, intentional or unintentional that could occur during a study. Adverse events are anticipated and covered by a policy. Conflict of interest is defined, and covered by a policy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Throughout the course of the study, I used epoche and analytic memoing technique to separate myself from the study, and the results of this epoche will be shared in the final report (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2021). Memoing is the collection of thoughts that have anything to do with the study in a formal method such as handwritten notes, computer files, or audio recordings (Saldana, 2021). I recorded reflective memo notes regarding what was being observed and learned from the data, as well as personal notions that may develop (Saldana, 2021). These analytic memos were taken in handwriting, computer files, or audio recordings and will be kept in addition to field notes in password protected files in the cloud-based Evernote software and/or in NVivo as appropriate (Saldana, 2021). I will review these memos to help explore the data, make conceptual leaps, and identify patterns and trends as well as emergent concepts not anticipated and to confirm or deny if personal bias is creeping into the research.

Transferability

Transferability explains how the results from this case study may be used or not used to make generalizations, associations, inferences, or to inform direction for future research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Results from a study that has transferability can be applied to other settings or situations with confidence (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this proposed study of exceptional college professors, transferability will be achieved through use of thick descriptions and direct quotes.

Thick Descriptions

Thick descriptions are not superficial (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thick descriptions are detailed accounts of an experience that give the experience context and meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The presentation of authentic experiences were crafted by weaving together rich details in thick descriptions from participant interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). To maximize the transferability of this study thick, rich descriptions of the setting, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, and researcher bracketing with full disclosure are provided (Patton, 2015). This enables other researchers to consider specific aspects of this study that may increase or decrease its transferability to a larger or different population. I will clearly state assertions and plan to include either summary statements or a vignette as appropriate so that other researchers may find this study useful should they desire to explore this phenomenon further.

Direct Quotes

Direct quotes from participants that convey deep meaning and rich detail are often used as a foundation to demonstrate themes that emerge in studies, and this approach will be used during this research (Martin, et al., 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Swaggerty & Broemmel, 2017). A direct quote is the actual words of a person, with no alteration or

interpretation (Patton, 2015). Direct quotes used in this study demonstrate that even though I may bring personal bias to the study, I was able to separate my thoughts and interpretations from the experiences that the participants share during this study.

Dependability

Dependability demonstrates that the study can be replicated by other researchers in order to confirm with consistency the findings of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing rich detail about the setting and context of this study in addition to the procedures for data collection and analysis establish that this study is dependable to the point where it could be repeated (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The collection of data from multiple sources including documents, interviews, and observations, which could all be repeated also serve to strengthen the fidelity of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability

Confirmability indicates that the study was conducted without bias or undue influence and is dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A study with high confirmability is neutral in nature, with results that have not been skewed to support a point of view held by the researcher or a research sponsor. Dependability demonstrates that the study can be replicated by other researchers in order to confirm with consistency the findings of a study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Providing rich detail about the setting and context of this study in addition to the procedures for data collection and analysis establish that this study is dependable to the point where it could be repeated (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The collection of data from multiple sources including documents, interviews, and observations, which could all be repeated also serve to strengthen the fidelity of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this proposed study,

confirmability will be achieved through use of an audit trail with external audits and reflexivity practiced during epoche.

Audit Trail

An audit trail is a thorough and complete formal accounting of what has been done in a research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Audit trail technique will be used to keep a detailed record of every step taken during this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This audit trail will include dates, locations, clear descriptions, rationale, and clarifications or responsibilities as appropriate. The audit trail will be maintained as a chronological catalog of events, and it may serve to support documentation, authentication of data, or to mitigate challenges that emerge. This audit trail may also be useful to confirm emergent data categories, patterns, or trends.

External Audits

External auditing is the review of findings by a subject matter expert who was not involved in data collection or analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). External auditing for this study was performed by a certified research methodologist trained in transcendental phenomenology who serves on the Liberty University dissertation committee. I worked closely with this expert in order to plan and implement a proper study. I remained in consistent communication with this expert through the course of data collection and analysis and did submit findings to this expert for review of preliminary results. Based on feedback from this expert, additional time may be invested in data collection or analysis in order to strengthen findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Reflexivity

In addition to efforts made to confirm the validity of the data collected, thoughtful effort will be taken to manage my role and influence as principal investigator for this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bracketing was used during epoche and throughout the process of the study with full

disclosure in order to bolster the trustworthiness of the research and assertions made (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). During epoche and throughout the study I used memoing technique to capture my thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and any assumptions that may emerge so that I may then bracket them from the findings of this study.

Ethical Considerations

It is important to consider ethical issues that may arise in qualitative research such as this study, where participants are asked to share thick, rich details about their personal experiences for the sake of improving knowledge and understanding (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Patton, 2015). This study was framed using social constructivism theory, and so I must appreciate that different participants may construct different experiences from their participation in this study (Vygotsky, 1980). As the principal investigator for this study, it was my responsibility to consider ethical issues related to this study and to have a plan that can be used to address potential issues (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical practices recommended for qualitative research include full disclosure to participants; maintaining a professional, respectful space; and maintaining confidentiality (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). For this study ethical considerations will be addressed using IRB approval and full disclosure.

IRB Approval

IRB approval obtained from Liberty University using the appropriate application form (Appendix A) ensures that ethical practices were conducted in this study of human subjects in accordance with the Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Human Research Protections. IRB approval also ensures that the safety, confidentiality, and privacy of human participants is maintained (Creswell & Poth, Gall et al., 2007). No data was collected for this study until after IRB approval has been obtained. The process of gaining approval from the

appropriate IRBs helped me to minimize anticipated risks, plan for potential issues, and maintain the trust and confidentiality of participants.

Full Disclosure

Full disclosure to participants of the purpose and procedure for this study including how data is stored and the use of pseudonyms for confidentiality, my role as principal investigator, and clarifying that participation will not impact academic standing was used to build trust with participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Full disclosure is the sharing of all pertinent information with participants in order to prevent deception (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Full disclosure was achieved through information shared via the email recruitment letter, and the participant consent form.

Care was taken to ensure that participants understand that they may withdraw from this study at any point with no penalty. Prior to collecting any data, participants were given clear instructions on how to communicate to me a decision to withdraw from the study. Participants were also informed of any risk or benefit to them that is associated with this participation in this study. The risk associated with participation in this study was minimal. The potential for risk would not be physical or legal, but could be psychological, as participants were asked to discuss past experiences (Gall et al., 2007). In order to mitigate this risk, participants signed a consent form indicating that they volunteer to participate, that they understand that they may withdraw at any time with no penalty, and that they do not believe or anticipate that they will have any negative thoughts related to reflecting upon their past experience as an award winner. There was no direct benefit to the participants for taking part in this study. The study may benefit the field of online distance learning, the organizations who confer awards to exceptional teachers, and the advancement of knowledge related to ALT. The mitigation of associated risk was assured by

obtaining IRB approval, which includes calculation of an objective risk-benefit ratio, prior to collection of data for this research study (Gall et al., 2007).

I used up-to-date secure computer software with password-protected files to store all data and files related to this study. All documentation and data collected for this study will be deleted three years after the completion of the dissertation that I wrote as a result of conducting this research study. Should the opportunity to use the data for additional research emerge, the data may remain in password-protected files.

As I am a professor who currently teaches online distance learning courses, I hold assumptions related to asynchronous course design and content relevance. I used memoing techniques to identify and separate these notions during epoche. Full disclosure of epoche memos is shared with the final report.

Participation in this study will not impact academic standing of participants. This is assured as participant identity was protected at all times through the use of pseudonyms. All data collected for this study was associated with the appropriate pseudonym and stored in password-protected computer files in order to further protect the identity of participants.

Data Storage

For this transcendental phenomenological study, I collected data from documents, interviews, and observations. All data collected was associated with a pseudonym in order to protect the identity of the participants. The data was then uploaded into password protected files in a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS), NVivo. The software program, NVivo, version 13 for Mac is a tool designed to help organize and manage data (QSR International, 2021). NVivo 13 is able to store and organize text, audio, video, emails, and other forms of data into one central interface (QSR International, 2021). This enables the researcher to explore the data

and conduct in-depth analysis. NVivo 13 will also store researcher field notes and can interface with Microsoft Word files (QSR International, 2021). NVivo was developed by the Australian software firm QSR International. The software has been in use and modified since it was introduced in 1997 (QSR International, 2021).

Summary

Chapter three explained the specific research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher positionality, procedures, and the data collection plan for this transcendental phenomenological study. The chapter provided rationale for the study design selected as well as detailed instructions for how data was collected and then analyzed and synthesized. Understanding the rationale for the study design and the specific steps that were taken to collect and analyze data validates how this study of exceptional professors' experiences will be used to address the problem of attrition in online distance learning courses. Sharing this level of detail will also position this study as one that can be replicated by future researchers. The intended outcome of this study, a list of best practices used by exceptional college professors who program relevance into online distance learning courses, is anticipated to be a practical tool that many will find useful to help address the continuing concern of attrition.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. This is important because deep understanding of what these exceptional professors do to convey relevance to students may help address the continuing concern over attrition rates for students in online distance learning courses (Baggaley, 2019; Muir et al., 2019; Stone et al., 2016; Venkateshwarlu et al., 2017; Whitman, 2018, Wu, 2016). This chapter shares findings that were generated based on analysis of the data collected. The chapter begins with a description of the study participants that includes recruitment, demographics of interest, and a textural description of each participant. The chapter then shares the results of the study which are organized into three main themes: communication, presence, and assignments. Three subthemes related to communication, three subthemes related to presence, and three subthemes related to assignments are then defined. Two outliers that were uncovered during this research are then discussed. Finally, the chapter shares the results to the central research question and the three sub research questions. Interpretation of the findings in this chapter will be shared in chapter five.

Participants

The 10 participants in this study are exceptional college professors who teach online, distance learning college courses. The descriptor "exceptional" specifies that the professor was the recipient of an award proffered by an organization governed by a board who objectively evaluated the professor's work. I used purposive sampling methods to select participants for this study to ensure that participants met requirements and had experienced the phenomenon of

interest (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Solicitation to participate was conducted through email. The first round of email solicitations was conducted by the DLC and the DLA, following procedure as described in Chapter Three of this document. The results from this effort yielded one participant. Based on this disappointing effort at recruitment, modification of the recruitment plan was discussed, requested, and approved by the IRB. This modification enabled me to solicit potential participants from any award-proffering organization governed by a board who would evaluate candidates for awards based on their work. This modified approach increased the size of the recruitment field to include colleges, universities, agencies in addition to the DLC and the DLA, and LMS organizations that issue awards.

The results of the recruitment efforts for this study are detailed in Table 1. After the disappointing results from the first round of recruitment, I conducted an internet search, locating 160 prospective participants who had been issued awards by a college or university, 61 prospective participants who had been issued awards by board-governed agencies (other than the DLA and the DLC), and 20 prospective participants who had been issued awards by an LMS. The awards conveyed to these prospective participants were all related directly to the teaching of an online distance learning course, were awarded by a board or other governing group, and were awarded directly to the professor, not to an instructional designer. Each of these prospective participants was contacted directly by me via my university email account, following the procedure outlined in Chapter Three of this document.

During the recruitment process and subsequent data collection, six prospective participants dropped out of this research study. The dropouts all occurred after completion of the initial survey, but prior to the prospective participant submitting their teaching philosophy or

scheduling a personal interview. This demonstrates that the prospective participants who chose to drop out of the study did so prior to having any personal interaction with the researcher.

The demographics of the 10 participants for this study are detailed in Table 2. Seven (70%) of the participants identified as male. Three (30%) of the participants identified as female. One of the participants, Brian, was conveyed an award from an LMS and three different awards from agencies. Accounting for Brian's three agency awards as a single "agency" award, 36.4% of the participants represent awards conveyed by an agency, 18.2% of the participants represent awards conveyed by an LMS, and 45.4% of the participants represent awards conveyed by a school (college or university). Looking closely at the awards conveyed by a school (college or university), 60% of the participants who were conveyed an award by a school were all recipients of an award issued by the same large, private, faith-based university. The participants all demonstrate significant experience teaching higher education courses. The participants demonstrate a range of years teaching higher education courses from 10 to 44 years, with a mean of 20.9 years' experience and a median of 19 years. The participants' word count for their Teaching Philosophies ranged from 180 to 1,627 words, with a mean of 570 words.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Award Issuer, Year	Gender	Seniority
P1 Andrew	Agency, 2018	Male	16
P2 Brian	LMS, 2014 Agency, 2014, 2016, 2018	Male	21
P3 Carla	*School, 2018	Female	11

P4 David	Agency, 2021	Male	10
P5 Ellen	*School, 2017	Female	25
P6 Fabian	*School, 2014	Male	18
P7 Gregg	LMS, 2020	Male	31
P8 Hannah	Agency, 2020	Female	44
P9 Ian	School, 2022	Male	13
P10 Jorge	School, 2016	Male	20

Note. The use of an asterisk (*) indicates the award was issued by the same large, private, faith-based university. Seniority is total years teaching in higher education.

Andrew

Andrew identifies as a male teacher with 16 years' experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by an agency in 2018. During his personal interview, Andrew established that he focuses on communicating with students on a personal level throughout the course. He encourages students to get to know him personally so that he can then write a strong letter of recommendation for them if needed. Andrew said, "I give them a carrot. I tell them you'll get a lot better letter if I remember you." Andrew consistently referenced use of reflection and projection in assignments to help the students connect novel course material to their own lives.

Brian

Brian identifies as a male teacher with 21 years' experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by an agency in 2014, 2016, 2018 and an award issued by an LMS in 2014. During his personal interview, Brian's focus is on aligning designed course content to course learning objectives in order to deliver a well-organized, active,

online learning experience. Brian said, “Think about the student experience. It’s not just uploading some of my files right into my course and calling it a course. We’ve still got faculty that use the LMS like a digital filing cabinet to supplement what they do in the in-person experience.” Brian was clear that while alignment must drive online course design, the assignments still need to be practical in nature and match up to a skill or task that a student might be asked to do after graduation in their chosen career role.

Carla

Carla identifies as a female teacher with 11 years’ experience teaching higher education courses. She was the recipient of an award issued by a school in 2018. During her personal interview, Carla established that she has been a consistently teaching online courses for the same university, the one that proffered her the award in 2018. The driving force in her classes is personal connection with students. Carla said, “The first thing that I do is connect with them [the students] personally. I require the students complete the university check in and tell a little about themselves. So I take the opportunity to check in with them. After they put up their announcement I reply with something personal so that I can connect with them and start to build a relationship because those relationships are what make the student learning experiences something that is valuable to them and it makes them want to work harder and learn because they feel connected to their instructor.” Carla carries this personalized approach into course assignments, using scaffolding technique to help the students understand the value of doing the work. She also uses student first names when providing feedback on assignments.

David

David identifies as a male teacher with 10 years’ experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by an agency in 2021 and mentioned during the

personal interview that he just learned he will receive a 2022 award from the school where he teaches. During his personal interview, David explained that meeting student needs and having a strong, consistent presence in his online courses drives his teaching style. David said, “I pay attention to student needs from a learning perspective. What is it that they need to learn for their ultimate job for industry, but also what do they need for what is going on in their personal world?” He stressed the need for online instructors to communicate regularly with students, to respond quickly to emails, to grade assignments quickly, and to be available to the students at times that work for the students. He also pointed out that instructor presence needs to be authentic. David holds that slightly imperfect instructional videos and video announcements humanize the professor, making the professor more approachable and easier for students to connect with.

Ellen

Ellen identifies as a female teacher with 25 years’ experience teaching higher education courses. She was the recipient of an award issued by a school in 2017. During her personal interview, Ellen stressed that successful online teaching is about creating and maintaining personal connections with students. Ellen said, “A lot of students really open up and they’ll tell me what’s going on in their lives, but either way, it’s just a glimpse. It’s a snapshot into what’s going on with those students. Then, what I can do to help them through the next eight weeks? It’s not all corrections, its connections.” Ellen reported that she uses a lot of real-world, contemporary examples when teaching to help students connect course material to their own lives. She also creates assignments that replicate tasks the students may do later in life related to their career choice.

Fabian

Fabian identifies as a male teacher with 18 years' experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by a school in 2014. During his personal interview, Fabian explained that his formal education was conducted outside the United States in a university where the focus was on ability to demonstrate learning not to memorize novel content. This experience molded his teaching style from the start, and it is now well crystalized into his online learning course design. Fabian said, "We can look stuff up now. We don't need to memorize stuff anymore. But the thinking skills are very important." Fabian explained that he learned through interaction with his professors where he labored through practical examples of the type of future work he would do as counselor. Fabian reported that he has documented his real-world experiences, which cover situations not covered in the textbooks, and he shares these documents with students to help them realize that they will need to develop the skills to use their knowledge, think things through, and make the best decision. Fabian mentioned that he will include contemporary, controversial topics in assignments to gain and attract student interest.

Gregg

Gregg identifies as a male teacher with 31 years' experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by an LMS in 2020. During his personal interview, Gregg's passion for his subject matter was evident. He was excited to talk about how he teaches and to talk about what he teaches. His passion for his subject, and for helping his students better understand this subject, clearly drives his teaching style. Gregg said, "It's the most interesting topic in the whole universe. It's like I wrote [in his teaching philosophy], there's either oceanographers or people who want to be oceanographers." Gregg's passion for his subject naturally flows into personal communications with students. He culls data he collects from an introductory discussion board during week one to create a student interest and

experience spreadsheet that he uses himself throughout the semester to connect with students and to help them find ways to personalize the course assignments to match their personal interests and where they are in their careers.

Hannah

Hannah identifies as a female teacher with 44 years' experience teaching higher education courses. She was the recipient of an award issued by an agency in 2020. During her personal interview, she explained that she invests time each semester listening to the students in the course so that she can tailor the content to their needs that semester. She also continually refines her assignments to that student are actually taking novel course material and applying it to real world conditions or to their own lives in their current jobs or in desired future jobs. When discussing how she develops assignments and discussion boards, Hannah said, "I think about can I apply that? How can I draw out some memories in my life that are related to this? So, I try to make sure we get beyond just the knowledge level of the content." Hannah recognizes that many students take her courses because they are required, but some students choose her courses as electives. This creates a cohort every semester of students studying for diverse careers. She intentionally creates assignments that students can modify to be useful in their future chosen career.

Ian

Ian identifies as a male teacher with 13 years' experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by a school in 2022. During his personal interview, Ian explained that he has been teaching online since he completed his doctoral program, and he actually thinks about how to teach online more effectively. His conclusion is that having an extremely well-organized online course developed within the LMS will be

appreciated by the students, who find the course easy to navigate. He also makes his entire course available to students from day one. Ian said, “My whole class is available. Everything they need for the whole semester is online and they can work the very first day and see that everything is there. And I think that lowers anxiety. I think it makes them feel more comfortable in their class and know that there's going to be clear expectations throughout the course.” Ian also explains to his students that the course is online, but it is not an independent study course. He uses a variety of activities to engage the students with each other and with him throughout the course.

Jorge

Jorge identifies as a male teacher with 20 years’ experience teaching higher education courses. He was the recipient of an award issued by a school in 2016. During his personal interview, Jorge specified that he was issued an award directly related to the level of interactivity that he builds into his online courses. Ian communicates with students consistently throughout the semester and works to build rapport with each student through personalized interaction. He also recognizes that many of his students work full time jobs, and he gives them the opportunity to personalize assignments so that the work they do resonates with their lives. Jorge says, “I don’t assign the content. I assign the method. So, they select the content based on something that’s relevant to them.” Jorge uses reflection and projection to help students apply novel course information to their own lives. He says, “I try to model being a reflective teacher to them. So I always reflect on my own experiences and share things about how I changed over time and how. Even though I’ve been doing this for 30 years now, I continue to try to learn and grow.”

Results

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe specifically what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. To understand this lived experience, I gathered data from each participant through an individual interview and collection of written teaching philosophies and recorded course lectures. This data collection was focused on the central research question and the three sub-research questions. I asked each participant to provide a copy of their teaching philosophy. I then conducted private, personal interviews via Zoom with each participant. During this interview I asked each participant 12 sequenced interview questions. When appropriate additional emergent questions were asked to give the participant the opportunity to elaborate on a statement made. Upon completion of the individual interview, I asked each participant to share a recording of a course lecture. I then analyzed the data using the modified van Kaam method.

This section contains the results of the data collection and analysis process. The results are arranged in three themes and nine subthemes that I identified through data analysis. All themes were framed with ALT, connected to the appropriate sub-research question, and depicted graphically in Table 2 with supporting data examples and techniques the participants used. The subthemes provide greater details regarding the experiences of the participants' experiences teaching online distance learning courses. The first theme, communication, includes the subthemes of importance, usefulness, and alignment. The second theme, presence, contains the subthemes of participation, passion, and experience. The third theme, assignments, contains the subthemes of absence of busy work, personalization, and penalty. These themes and subthemes will be presented next.

Table 2

Synthesis of themes, subthemes, techniques, ALT assumptions, and research questions

Theme	Subtheme	Technique	ALT	SRQ
Communication				
	Importance			
		Repetition	5, 6	1
		Student Agency	1, 2	1
	Usefulness			
		Reflection	3	3
		Projection	5	3
	Alignment			
		Focused Lectures	1, 4	1
		Practical Assignments	5	1, 3
Presence				
	Participation			
		Consistency	6	1
		Connection	2, 3	2
	Passion			
		Authenticity	6	2
		Contemporary	1	3
	Experience			
		Expertise	3	1, 2
		Application	3	3

Assignments				
	Absence of Busy Work			
		Communication	2	1,2
		Application	5	1,2
	Personalization			
		Adaptability	2,5	1,2
		Contemporary	5,6	1,2
	Penalty			
		Respect	3, 6	1
		Understanding	3, 6	1

Note. SRQ = Corresponding Sub Research Question. 1 = Sub Research Question 1. 2 = Sub Research Question 2. 3= Sub Research Question 3. It is implied that all relate to the central research question.

ALT Assumptions: 1 = need to know, 2 = learner self-concept, 3 = experience, 4 = readiness to learn, 5 = problem-solving orientation, 6 = motivation.

Communication

The participants provided their perspectives on communicating in online distance learning courses. They talked extensively about what they do to communicate with students. They also talked extensively about the frequency of communications with students in general and with students who are struggling in the course or who are missing assignment due dates. Of key import is that the professors convey to students the importance and usefulness of the course content. Participant use of key words related to relevance and ALT in their teaching

philosophies, their personal interviews, and their course lectures is depicted graphically in Table 3. The data in this table demonstrates that there was more use of key words related to relevance and to ALT by the participants in their personal interviews than in their teaching philosophies or in the recorded course lectures they provided.

Table 3

Participant use of key words: relevant or relevance, meaningful, kid, and adult

Word	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	P10
Word Usage In Teaching Philosophy										
Relevant or Relevance	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	1
Meaningful	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	1
Kid	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Adult	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Word Usage During Personal Interview										
Relevant or Relevance	6	0	0	0	0	0		4	0	0
Meaningful	1	0	4	1	2	1	1	0	1	3
Kid	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Adult	27	5	0	0	0	4	2	0	1	1
Word Usage During Course Lecture										
Relevant or Relevance	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0
Meaningful	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kid	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Adult	4	5	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	1

Note. Data is presented for the instances of the word “relevant” and the word “relevance” together since these share the same word stem responsible for their lexical meaning.

Professor communication with the students was evident in the personal interviews. This communication often begins early in the semester and focuses on conveying the relevance of the course content. Ian said, “The very first day when we start to talk about policy, we talk a lot about how we hear a lot about it and maybe how we're disengaged with some of it. But I try to connect it back to their community specifically and immediately. I try to help them connect everything to something they're doing or to the real world or how it connects to them. “In her interview, Carla re-enforced the importance of communication. Carla said, "I try to scaffold my assignments so that the students can understand the value that it brings to keep them communicating with me regularly about pieces of their assignments, and not just turn it all in at once.” Note that in her communication, Carla also works to convey the relevance of the course content to students.

Importance

A relationship between perceived degree of relevance and contextual effect is generally accepted by researchers (Belet, 2018; Keller, 2009; Schmidt et al., 2019; Sperber & Wilson, 1995). When processing novel information, individuals will search for comparative relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995). The participants interviewed for this study make a consistent effort to provide context for their students. They explain and emphasize to students why the content in the course is important for the students to learn. They do not assume that the students will appreciate the gravity the content holds. They frequently share their own experience working and solving problems in the career field that the students are studying to work in. David said,

> I tell the students, you know , if you get something wrong in the real world , nobody's going to pop out around the corner and tell you , 'Oh , this is the solution.' You're going to have to go and figure it out. And I'm telling you exactly where you go to figure it out . I'm not just saying 'Check chapter five.' I'm telling you the exact section in chapter five, go to that section, reread those three paragraphs, and if it still doesn't make sense, reach out to me, email me, and I'm happy to talk with you about it.

A consistent effort to provide context for students through intentional focused communication was reported by the participants in this study. This focused communication, which is direct enough to be considered an ostensive stimulus (Sperber & Wilson, 1996), provides more than context. It helps convey to students that the content in the course is relevant.

Usefulness

A relationship between student perception of course usefulness, course satisfaction, and plans to persist has been documented (Cheng, 2020). This relationship has much space for variability based on personal experience, constructs, and goals (Belet, 2018; Bokan & Griffin, 2018; Iaconelli & Anderman, 2021; Lewis, 2020; Keller, 2009; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). The participants interviewed for this study stress to their students that the content in this course will be useful to them personally. Carla, who teaches a course on government policy, said**,**

> Early in my classes, I explain to the students that government is something that affects their lives on a day to day basis. I tell them that government is personal. Even if they don't go into the practice of government, or the practice of public administration , if they don't run for office, or if they don't work for a government

> agency, this information is still valuable because it helps them understand how to navigate their world.

The participants' communication to students that the content in the course will be useful to them personally is direct and clear. This intentional statement of usefulness, which is direct enough to be considered an ostensive stimulus (Sperber & Wilson, 1996), provides more than context to the students. It helps convey to students that the content in the course has practical usefulness and is relevant.

Alignment

When students understand what is in a course for them personally, their engagement may increase (Belet, 2018; Braten et al., 2018; Keller, 2009). The participants interviewed for this study consistently check that all the content in their courses aligns with the learning objectives. The participants assigned gravity to the importance of conveying to students that all course content aligns to learning objectives. They talked extensively about the efforts they take to ensure that alignment exists. Fabian said,

> When I have an activity for the students to do, in the activity description and instructions I list out how the work aligns to the module objectives and the course objectives. It's my check and balance. If I'm going to put that in the activity description, I'm attesting to the fact that, yes, this activity aligns to the module objectives and I have already aligned the module objectives to the course level objectives. If I can't align the activity work to a particular objective, why am I asking them to do that assignment? I don't want busy work. I want things that are truly helping them build skills.

In his personal interview Brian expressed supporting views that were in support of Fabian when he said,

> When I think about alignment, I don't just think about the content, the activities, the communication, and the assignments. I think about the ways I am trying to measure their learning. I ask myself, "Was I truly measuring the learning that I intended to measure?"

In addition to created courses with content that properly aligns to learning objectives, the participants tell the students that the course content aligns with their learning objectives. Ellen leaves no room for students to miss this alignment. Ellen said,

> In the first week of class I clearly establish the rationale for why: why they are doing all this work. I then carry that message through the rest of the course in announcements. I am constantly reminding students and pointing out real world examples of things really happening.

The gravity the participants in this study assign to the importance of conveying to students that all course content aligns to learning objectives is notable. Consistent with their style of communication, the participants do not expect the students to organically pick up on this alignment. The participants use direct, clear statements to clarify for the students that the work that they are doing aligns with the course learning objectives.

Presence

The participants provided their perspectives on teacher presence in online distance learning courses. They talked extensively about the importance of the teacher creating and maintaining a significant presence through participation in all aspects of the online course to

build student perception of the course relevance. Jorge talked about the importance of keeping courses up to date with contemporary events when he said,

> In an online course, if you're not careful there is no presence of the instructor in the class because it was all recorded in the past. I have started dropping in some kind of current event in my welcome message and weekly video announcements so that the students know that I'm not just replaying the same messages every semester.

The participants also explained the importance of conveying to students their personal passion for the subject they teach. Subject matter passion organically flowed from the participants during the course of discussion. Gregg, said,

> I teach about the most interesting topic in the universe. The way I see it, there are oceanographers and people who want to be oceanographers. I'm obviously enthusiastic for the ocean, and this comes across in my lectures and my discussions and my interactions with students.

The participants in this study placed high value on the presence of the instructor in an online distance learning course in order to convey to students that the course content is relevant. These participants explained that presence must be maintained through active participation on behalf of the instructor. The participants work to establish and maintain their presence in the online distance learning courses they teach.

Participation

The role of the instructor as a supporter of learning in online distance learning courses has been established (Arghode et al., 2017; Brieger et al., 2020; Decelle, 2016; Diep et al., 2019; Inan et al., 2017; Lewis, 2020; Roberts, 2019). The participants interviewed for this study

routinely participate with intention in many aspects of their courses so that they can connect with and support the students. The participants spoke at length regarding the importance of the instructor participation in all aspects of the course, including discussion boards. Only one participant reported minimal participation in course discussion boards, and this participant is noted as an outlier. Participation in discussion boards was noted as useful to reinforce the importance of the course content. Ian said, "I model my discussion questions to help the students integrate, connect, and reflect. And I try to make sure that they feel like their career is important and that it connects back with the course materials."

All the participants used the announcement feature in the LMS and emails to further contact with students. The participants spoke at length about the importance of being available to participate in distance-based conversations with students. David said,

> It's it comes down to communicating with students, comes down to responding to emails, quickly being available in the hours in which the students are available. You know, when you're your online instructor, typically the students are available the opposite of nine to five. They are usually working full time. And so you have to be available evenings and weekends to respond to questions and sometimes just set up video chat if it seems like it's appropriate for a student. I find that sometimes it's easier just to have a conversation and it provides a personal touch, offering timely feedback and detailed feedback to students. I think that that is very important in this learning space.

The participants in this study talked at length about how, when, and why they communicate with their students in online distance learning courses. It was clear during the interviews that these participants all find that establishing two-way communication with students builds student

interest in the course content. It was interesting to note that these participants use various forms of technology to communicate with students and personalize communication as much as possible.

Passion

Passion for teaching is accepted as an important disposition that can positively affect student behavior (Martin & Mulvihill, 2017; Zhang, 2019). During personal interviews, the participants talked at length about their personal passion for their subject transferring to the students and helping build student interest in the course content. The participants used the word passion frequently during their personal interviews. David said**,**

> My passion can come through to students in different ways in the online format . But if they don't see that I'm excited about it or that there's something to get excited about, then why would they want to learn it? That just becomes information, and they can learn information just by Googling. So I try and add that level of passion and excitement to show them this is something that really is impactful. I also try and bring in examples from my professional experience to say, “Oh yeah , let me tell you a story about when this happened a couple of years back. And this is how it actually happened. This isn't just theory. This actually happened.” When you explain it to people like that, I think that makes it more salient for the students.

The participants in this study were passionate that professors should have personal passion for the subject they teach. The participants talked about how authentic passion for a subject can transfer to students. When this happens, student interest in the course content builds, and students connect with the course content on a deeper level.

Experience

The level of authentic experience and conceptual knowledge a professor conveys can positively affect student behavior (Flegl & Andrade Rosas, 2019; Swan et. al., 2020). During personal interviews, the participants talked at length about how they incorporate their past working experiences into their courses to convey to students that they hold expertise and conceptual knowledge in the subject they are teaching and to emphasize how the course subject matter will be useful to students in their chosen future careers. Fabian has written an entire series of documents that describe events that happened to him during his counseling career and how he handled them. He shares these documents with his students to reinforce to students that he has valuable, real-world experience in his subject matter. Fabian said,

> I have hundreds of things that happened to me that are not in the book and I tell the students these [experiences] aren't in the book and you need to be able to think through these things. I try to challenge them through those experiences, and they start to realize 'Oh, I guess that isn't in the book. I better start listening.'

The participants in this study held that to increase student concept of course content relevance they must make sure the students know that they themselves are subject matter experts with practical experience in the career the students aspire towards. The participants explained how they incorporate their past working experiences into their courses. This sharing of experiences conveys to students that the professors hold expertise and conceptual knowledge in the subject they are teaching. This intentional activity further emphasizes how the course subject matter will be useful to students in their chosen future careers.

Assignments

Research supports the use of assignments designed so that students must apply novel concepts from a course to their own lives (Carnegie, 2021; Erkmann et al., 2019). The participants in this study provided their perspectives on use of assignments in online distance learning courses. During personal interviews, they talked extensively about the importance of creating assignments for online courses that would be appropriate for delivery in the online space and provide the students the opportunity to apply learning in a practical way. Three subthemes that emerged during synthesis of the participant personal interviews in regard to assignments were a shared opinion of busy work (absence of busy work), the use of personalization, and limiting penalties.

Absence of Busy Work

During the personal interviews conducted for this study, the participants used the term "busy work" to describe assignments that they perceived were low in learning value while still demanding time and attention from students. This term, "busy work" is far removed from what Frison and Tino (2019) describe as work-related learning, which engages students in assignments that require them to apply knowledge in a way that develops skills that will be used in a future career. Erkmann et al. (2019) mention that assignments that do not challenge students to apply novel concepts are more likely to be perceived by students as being less meaningful. The participants in this study who mentioned busy work stated clearly that they do not include busy work in their courses and that they tell this to their students. Ian said, "I never do busy work. In my opinion that's disrespectful to students." Brian includes the specific, applicable course objectives in the descriptions of his assignments. In this way he communicates to students the aligned relationship of the assignment to the course content and learning objectives, clarifying for the students that the assignment is not busy work. When designing online courses, Brian said

he asks himself this question, “If I can't align that to a particular objective, why am I asking to do that assignment?”

The participants in this study stated that they do not include “busy work” in their online distance learning courses. The participants shared a perspective that assignments need to be practical and useful. What was of great interest here was that the professors do not take for granted that the students will recognize the usefulness of the course assignments. The professors use clear and direct language to explain to the students that the course assignments are not “busy work.”

Personalization

Use of assignments that are open-ended or that give students the opportunity for personalization are rising in use in online distance learning (Beckman et al., 2021; Hytinen et al., 2021). The participants in this study frequently mentioned that they intentionally design assignments so that students can modify part of the assignment to match up to something they are currently doing or that they hope to do in their chosen future career. David said, “ I give them some element of personal choice all the way through with my assignments.” Jorge, who teaches teachers courses on effective teaching methods, echoed this sentiment when he said, “I don't assign the content that they teach. I just assign the method. And so then they select the content based on something that's relevant to them.”

The participants create meaningful application for students and generate interest in assignments by enabling students to personalize the assignment so that the work builds on a genuine topic of interest and may prove useful for the student in their life or work. David says,

> I always give them some element of choice within the projects so that they can do it on something that’s more interesting to them. And I think it comes alive if its

> more interesting to them. I'm not one that gives them "Pick one of these three projects to do." I don't do that.

The participants in this study explained that they intentionally design assignments so that they can be modified by individual students. This modification is encouraged by the professors. The professors invest time explaining to students why they should modify part of the assignment to match up to something they are currently doing or that they hope to do in their chosen future career.

Penalty

Policies for late assignments in college courses are common, yet variable (Bosch, 2020; Crocker, 2021). Research shows that not all late assignments are related to active student procrastination (Crocker, 2021; Nieberding & Heckler, 2021). Accepting this, the endorsement of strict and punitive late policies is variable (Bosch, 2020; Crocker, 2021; Nieberding & Heckler, 2021). During the personal interviews conducted for this study, the participants consistently stated that they accept late assignments with little penalty. Andrew said, "Things do happen and people are late. I do take off for it, but it's not the most important thing. As long as the learning takes place, that's what I care about." Gregg concurred with Andrew, explaining that if a student contacts him in advance to let him know an assignment will be late, he will grant pardon and not deduct points for lateness.

Outlier Data and Findings

During the course of this study, several unexpected findings which are outliers in relation to the other data were discovered. These outliers may be considered minor, but they will be reported upon. The outlier findings are a professor who actively uses discussion boards in online learning courses, but who does not routinely participate in the online discussion boards, a

professor who intentionally does not tell the students the importance of course material, and an instructor who does not accept late assignments.

Outlier Finding #1

One participant in this study reported to actively uses discussion boards in online learning courses, but to not routinely participate in these online discussion boards. This is in contrast to the other nine participants who all reported routinely using and participating in the online discussion boards. Hannah said,

> I spend a lot of time developing my discussion boards and fine tuning the questions that I ask so that they take what they've learned in reading or videos or whatever and they go a step further to apply it." Hannah continues, "I usually don't chime in unless I feel like something posted is inaccurate or something is left unsaid.

Despite this observation, the participant does use effective discussion board in online distance learning courses that are designed to help students connect novel course content to their own lives.

Outlier Finding #2

One participant in this study reported to not tell the students that the course material was important for them to learn. Instead, this professor challenged the students to envision themselves in their future career and decide for themselves if they would need the course information. This is in contrast to the other nine participants who all reported routinely stressing that the course content would be useful in the student's future chosen careers. Andrew said,

> What I'll say is, "Visualize yourself 10 years from now and what role you are in. Are you going to need to be able to do this?" I let them decide for themselves, for

> the future career that they're choosing for themselves, “Will this matter to me?” Because if they decide that for themselves, I believe it more carries more weight than if I tell them “This matters. Pay attention.”

Andrew’s decision to give the onus of determining what materials in the course are actually useful to students is in contrast to the other participants in this study, and is constructivist in nature (Vygotsky, 1978). He holds that when students make this decision for themselves, the material will hold a higher degree of relevance. Andrew’s unique approach is highly consistent with a constructivist, adult learning theory framework similar to what Decelle (2016) found effective in the training and transitioning to work of adult nursing students. Andrew’s approach aligned with the work of Belet (2018) and Braten et al. (2018) who found that the degree to which students decide information will be useful to them in attaining a goal is the degree of content relevance.

Outlier Finding #3

One participant in this study reported to not accept late assignments. This is in contrast to the other nine participants who all reported accepting late assignments, often with little penalty. Ian said,

> I have a consistent policy from the very beginning: no late assignments. I’m very structured that way. I give them everything that is due. They can put it in their calendar right now. I don’t change deadlines. I don’t do anything like that.

The stance towards late assignments that Ian uses is in contrast to the other nine participants. Ian explained that he wants his student to learn to plan their time and to complete work to meet deadlines, which is something that they will be called upon to do in their future chosen careers. Although Ian’s stance is different from the other participants, Ian held that this approach was

consistent with the real world students will work in, which reinforces the appropriateness and relevance of this approach.

Research Question Responses

This section provides concise answers to the research questions addressed in this study. This study focused on one central research question. This central research question was further developed with three supporting sub research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of exceptional college professors who convey relevance in online distance learning courses? The participants' perspective is that to convey course content relevance to students, the professors have to work on creating meaningful connections with students in online distance learning courses, perhaps focusing on this more than they would in a traditional face-to face class environment. These professors work to create meaningful connections with students through instructor presence in the expected venue of course activities and also through the unexpected venue of assignment feedback. These professors invest significant time and attention to establish their presence in the online course. All of the participants in this study used the word "connection" specifically during the personal interviews, with many of the professors providing specific examples of what they do to make the connections with students. They offer personalized, useful, thought-provoking feedback on assignments to make the feedback more meaningful and useful to students. Ellen said, "It's about connection, not correction." Gregg uses his office hours and assignments to get to know his students personally, often helping his students personalize larger assignments to complement their personal interests, current careers, or future career aspirations. Gregg said, "I am able to get to know the students on a level that I can't reach in a face-to-face class." The experiences of the

exceptional college professor participants in this study who convey relevance in online distance learning courses show that these professors intentionally work to creating meaningful connections with students. They then use the established two-way communication channels to convey to students the usefulness and relevance of the course material.

Sub Question One

What are the experiences of exceptional college professors who specifically convey that the content in online distance learning course is relevant to the students in a course? The participants align the course learning objectives to their course content and they repeatedly tell the students how they will benefit from learning the material. The participants state explicitly that there is no "busy work" associated with their courses. The participants' perspective is that the practical, customizable assignments they include in their courses with explanation of why the assignment is practical and how the assignment can be customized drive home to students that the content in the course has usefulness for them personally. It is really about aligning practical course work to course learning objectives stated in terms the students understand and value. David said,

> I give them [the students] some element of personal choice in every single one of my assignments. I give them free reign to pick any topic they want or I give them a cultivated list to choose from, so there is some element of choice. I don't give them a choice of three projects, but the opportunity to pick certain elements of the project so that they can do the project on something that is more interesting to them. I post a 'key take-away statement' at the top of every single assignment so that the students understand what the value add is for them. I told them at the beginning that I don't give busy work and that if I give them a project there is a

> reason for them to do that project. I have had multiple students tell me that they're using these specific projects in job interviews.

The participants in this study who specifically convey that the content in online distance learning course is relevant to the students in a course do so with overt, direct explanation to students that the materials in the course will be useful to the students.

Sub Question Two

What are the experiences of exceptional college professors who attract and hold the attention of students in online distance learning courses? The participants agree that their participation in the course with passion for their subject transfers to students. The participants' perspective is that professors must interact with online distance learning students on a regular basis and in a way that is authentic. Jorge said,

> I produce weekly video announcements for my students that are not polished and sterile. I want them to see me as a real person. I try to model being a reflective teacher to them and so I always reflect on my own experiences and share things about how I changed things over time and how. Even though I've been doing this for 30 years now, I continue to try to learn and grow and do good things.

The experiences of the exceptional college professor participants in this study who attract and hold the attention of students in online distance learning courses demonstrates that their participation in the course with passion for their subject transfers to students.

Sub Question Three

What are the experiences of exceptional college professors who link online distance learning course content to student's past, present, and future experiences? The participants consistently used the techniques of reflection and projection to help students link course content

to their own lives to find meaning and use. Reflection technique helped students connect course content to past experiences. Andrew said,

> I want people to think back on their past experiences and build on that. Some of them don't know what they're going to be doing five years from now. They're just trying to advance, and that's perfectly understandable. When they cannot project into their future I tell them to look at your past experiences and how would you implement what you've learned in the last two weeks to improve the outcomes.

Projection techniques helped students connect course content to anticipated successful future versions of themselves operating in their chosen career. Andrew said,

> I'll say, visualize yourself 10 years from now, and what role you are in. Are you going to need to be able to do this? If you will need to be able to do this when you're faced with this again in the future, the experience of doing it now will help you then.

The experiences of the exceptional college professor participants in this study who link online distance learning course content to student's past, present, and future experiences demonstrate consistent use of the techniques of reflection and projection in course lectures, in communications, and in assignments. The professors hold that this approach further conveys to students the usefulness and relevance of what they are learning.

Summary

The data collected for this research demonstrates that exceptional college professors who program relevance into their online distance learning courses focus their efforts on communication, presence, and assignment design. These professors use a variety of planned, consistent communication with students to convey to students that the course content is

important, useful, and aligned with the learning objectives for the course. These professors work to establish and maintain their personal presence in the online courses they teach. These professors actively participate online with students and take care to share their passion for their subject with students. They share with the students their own personal experience working in the career field that the students aspire to work in upon graduation. This approach establishes these professors as an active presence in the course that is willing to share real world experience that will help the students as they prepare for their careers. These professors also invest time designing assignments specifically for their online courses. A significant finding in this research was the strategy of telling students in straight forward language that there is no "busy work" associated with the course, and that everything they learn will have use in the student's chosen future career. In summary, the data collected for this research demonstrates that exceptional college professors who program relevance into their online distance learning courses accomplish this through a variety of intentional actions. These professors do not assume that students will recognize the gravity of the course content without prompting.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to specifically describe what is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. This chapter presents a discussion and interpretation of findings that were discovered through data analysis. Three main themes and nine subthemes are summarized. With these interpretations in mind, implications for practice and theoretical and empirical implications are then discussed. I recommend potential use for scalable best practices identified in this study. A list of scalable best practices employed by the participants in this study has been compiled and related to the six assumptions of ALT (Appendix R). Finally, the limitations and delimitations of this study are presented. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research.

Discussion

In this section, I use transcendental phenomenological research methods to identify findings and to provide in-depth interpretations of those findings. Through thematic analysis, three main thematic findings were identified: communication that is consistent and focused, instructor presence in the online course, and development of practical assignments that relate to student current and future needs. In discussion of these findings, I address how they relate to the six assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012).

Interpretation of Findings

This research examined the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. Upon completion of the data analysis, three themes that demonstrate how professors convey relevance were identified, which

included *communication*, *presence*, and *assignments*. Within the theme of *communication* were three sub-themes that included *importance*, *usefulness*, and *alignment*. Within the theme of *presence* were three sub-themes that included *participation*, *passion*, and *experience*. Within the theme of *assignments* were three sub-themes of *absence of busy work*, *personalization*, and *penalty*. To deepen understanding, these themes are interpreted using the applicable assumptions of ALT (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012).

Summary of Thematic Findings

Through thematic analysis many interesting themes were discovered. Three themes stood out as the most significant. These themes were the use of consistent and focused communication, instructor presence and posture in the online course, and the development of practical assignments that students find meaningful in their current and future careers. When summarized, the thematic findings of this study demonstrate that to convey relevance to students taking online distance learning courses, professors must establish their presence in the online course and assume the posture of an experienced expert willing to share useful advice. Presence is established and maintained with communication appropriate for adults. Posture as an experienced expert is strengthened through the use of practical course assignments that students will find useful currently and in their future chosen careers, and posture is solidified through conveying respect to students as adult learners who have other important obligations on their time in addition to their studies. In summary, the approaches taken by the exceptional college professor participants in this study demonstrate acknowledgement that in order to attract and hold student attention, the students in their courses are adults and should be addressed as adult learners, not as child learners (Knowles, 1980). When these themes were framed using ALT and considered, my key interpretations were that students are respected as adult learners, and that

participant intent to convey content, medium, and temporal relevance may not always align with follow through actions for temporal relevance.

Communication. Consistent, direct, and focused communication between the professor participants and their students was discussed frequently during the participant interviews for this study. The participants expressed that successful communication needed to include the students reaching back to them. The professors used a variety of mediums to communicate including email, phone calls, and web-based meetings using Zoom or a similar service. One participant had the ability to communicate with students via a text messaging option that the school recently established. He reported this medium to be quickly popular with the students. The use of varied mediums to communicate demonstrated the power of using a relevant medium when teaching online distance learning courses and supported the work of Beard and Konukman (2020), Bryson and Andres (2020), and Czerniewicz et al. (2019). The quick adoption by students of the texting method to communicate with professors is notable and worth further investigation, as use of this medium requires an investment by the school.

The participants also talked frequently about the direct and clear language they used to communicate content relevance to the students. The word choices the professors used stated that the course content would be useful and valuable to the students' academic, career, or personal goals. These actions reinforce the work of Belet (2018) and Braten et al. (2018), but these actions may be interpreted to contrast constructivist theory which acknowledges that individuals create their own realities based on what matters to them or what they experience (Vygotsky, 1978). The intentional and repetitious use of direct, clear language would also reduce the cognitive load that may be associated with the concept of relevance, which Sperber and Wilson (1986, 1995) describe as an individual's active search for meaning and usefulness when

processing novel information. The cognitive load associated with relevance has been defined as including the incorporation of contextual effect as well as processing effort (Piaget, 1977; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Through the use of direct, clear language, the professor participants in this study effectively reduced the cognitive load associated with relevance by providing context for current and future use of novel information. This demonstrated the professors' ability to communicate temporal relevance to their students, supporting the work of Jiang et al. (2020), Lewis (2020), Schmidt et al. (2019), and Van Straaten et al. (2015).

In summary, the professor participants in this study explained how they use intentional communications strategies to convey content, medium, and temporal relevance to the students in their online distance learning courses. When considered and framed using the six assumptions of ALT, the efforts of the communication strategies these professors used align well with the first assumption of ALT: need to know and the second assumption of ALT: learner self-concept (Knowles 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). The actions taken by the professor participants in this study support the findings of Martin et al. (2019), who stressed that to meet online distance learning student needs, the professors must be conscious of variable learner needs and learners who have a heightened focus on content they decide holds personal relevance.

Presence. The participants in this study agreed that instructor presence must be intentionally established and actively maintained throughout the duration of an online distance-learning course in order to convey to students that the course will be relevant to them. These participants actively participated in the course activities, engaging with students in the process. Through this participation, the professors were able to convey to students their passion for their subject that the content itself was useful and meaningful, promoting content relevance. These

actions support the findings of Authement and Dormire (2020), who stressed that teacher presence is fundamental to student success in online distance learning courses. The professor participants in this study used a variety of mediums to establish and maintain presence in the online courses they teach, supporting the findings of Beard and Konukman (2020), Bryson and Andres (2020), and Martin et al. (2019). The professor participants in this study routinely used the techniques of projection and reflection to establish temporal relevance by helping students connect the usefulness of the course content to their own past, present, and future. These actions support the work of Belet (2018), Luo et al. (2017), Schmidt et al. (2019), and Van Straaten et al. (2015).

When considered and framed using the six assumptions of ALT, the efforts of the strategies these professors used to establish and maintain presence in the course with the posture of an expert align well with the fourth assumption of ALT: readiness to learn, and the sixth assumption of ALT: motivation. Knowles (1980) held that adult learners have an intrinsic desire to learn because they attend courses of their own volition, not due to pressure from societal norms. By sharing their passion for their subject matter in the online distance learning courses that they teach, the professor participants in this study demonstrated how they connect with students who are ready to learn more about the particular subject, supporting the findings of Jiang et al. (2020), Keller (2009), Robinson et al. (2017), and Sperber and Wilson (1995).

Assignments. The participants in this study invested significant time through thought and planning to design and develop practical assignments for their courses that were the antithesis of what they described as “busy work.” The professors used clear and direct language as an ostensive stimulus to communicate to their students that there was no “busy work” in their courses. These professors frequently explained to the students why and how the assignments

would be of benefit to the students now and in their future. The effort invested in the development of these assignments, the positioning of the assignments, and the assignment explanations convey to the students that the assignments hold content and temporal relevance. This thoughtful and detailed design and delivery of assignments supports the findings of Belet (2018) and Braten et al. (2018) who defined content relevance as content that is related to and that meets students' academic, career, or personal needs. The practical nature of the assignments the professors created, which are designed to mimic work the students will do in their chosen current or future careers, created an opportunity for the students to learn by doing. This supports the findings of Boseman and Fernhaber (2019) and Hermanns and Keller (2021). By explaining to their students how the assignments would benefit the students now and in their future, these professors conveyed to students the temporal relevance of the assignments, supporting the work of Jiang et al. (2020), Lewis (2020), Schmidt et al. (2019), and Van Straaten et al. (2015).

When considered and framed using the six assumptions of ALT, the efforts of the strategies these professors used to develop assignments in the course align well with the third assumption of ALT: experience, and the fifth assumption of ALT: orientation. Knowles (1980) specified that adult learners differ from child learners due to their bank of lived experiences. The professors in this study explained to their students how and why the assignments would benefit the students now and in their futures. This explanation is a strong example of good instruction technique that helps students connect the assignments to their experiences, and it supports the findings of Brieger et al. (2020), Lewis (2020), and Woodley et al. (2017). The professors also encouraged students to personalize the assignments to match their current or anticipated future needs. These professors were prompting the students to use their course assignments to address real-world situations the students might be experiencing, which supports the problem-solving

orientation associated with ALT (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012). By promoting the association of the course content with real-world issues the students experience, the professors supported the findings of Decelle (2016), Jiang et al. (2020), and Keller (2009).

Students are respected as adult learners. One of the remarkable findings in this study is that the professor participants recognize and appreciate that students who choose to take online distance learning courses often have additional obligations and responsibilities to careers, to families, to their communities, and to other personal interests that may influence when and how the students access the course and turn in assignments. This supports the findings of Martin et al. (2019) who stressed that adult learners are more likely to have obligations that impede on their study time. The professors participants in this study held their students' time in such high regard that they carefully planned and included only practical, useful assignments in their courses.

Additionally, nine of the ten professor participants in this study reported that there was minimal penalty for the submission of late assignments. The professor participants in this study explained that the minimal penalty was enforced because they were more concerned with the students doing the work well and learning than they were with the students' ability to meet hard deadlines. The professor participants in this study are using, but not strictly enforcing, rigid assignment due dates. This approach aligns with research that indicates that rigid due dates are counterproductive and detract from student participation (Bisin & Hyndman, 2020; Miller et al., 2019). Adopting a more flexible stance towards assignment deadlines may further separate a college professor from the role of an authoritarian parent. High levels of demanding, authoritarian parenting is positively related to high levels of procrastination and counterproductive to performance (Chen et al., 2022). By granting their students more autonomy with regard to assignment due dates in their online courses, the professor participants in this

study demonstrate use of adult learning theory that respects the difference between adult and child learners.

Intent and action. When the data collected for this study was triangulated, some disconnect was observed between professor intention and action to convey content, medium, and temporal relevance. The teaching philosophies were regarded as what the professors intend to do. The personal interviews were regarded as what the professors say they are doing, and the course lectures were used to confirm or deny what the professors are actually doing. In their teaching philosophies, the professors participating in this study intended to teach courses with highly relevant content, using appropriate mediums for delivery. Several of the participants mentioned the importance of having the students apply what they are learning through practical assignments. None of the professors directly addressed connecting the course content to students chosen future careers. One of the professors, Andrew, mentioned the importance of using reflection to help students find usefulness and meaning in the course. During the personal interviews, the professor participants professed to be using varied, relevant mediums and communicating to students that the course content was relevant and would be meaningful to the students in their chosen future careers. However, when the course lectures were reviewed, the professors fell short on delivering the future aspect of temporal relevance. In the course lectures the professors demonstrated strong delivery of content relevance and present time temporal relevance. They frequently used real world scenarios and shared stories of their own personal experiences. However, only one professor, Fabian, referred to how the students might use the course lecture content in their future chosen career. It is important to note that only one lecture was observed per professor; this one lecture may not be fully representative of the professor's teaching style. The triangulation of the data presented a disconnect related to temporal relevance

between what the professors plan to do as stated in their teaching philosophies, what they say they do in their personal interviews, and what they actually do, as demonstrated in the recorded course lectures. This finding fails to clarify what strategies can be used to convey temporal relevance to help students connect course content to different points in their lives (Belet, 2018; Schmidt et al., 2019; Van Straaten et al., 2015).

Implications for Policy or Practice

The literature supports the importance of understanding the specific use of exceptional teaching strategies that effectively convey relevance to online distance learning students. Yet, professors may not be aware of specific teaching strategies they can employ to effectively convey relevance to students in online distance learning courses. Thus, institutional and personal practices must be altered and addressed to enable professors to best convey relevance to students enrolled in online distance learning courses. This section will focus on articulating the study's implications for practice.

Implications for Practice

Though this study only included exceptional college professors teaching online distance learning courses and was executed in the United States of America, the findings may apply to other institutions and to in-person learning courses. This study showed that exceptional college professors plan and take specific actions to convey to students that the course will be relevant for them in terms of content, in terms of mediums used, and in terms of temporality. The results of this study, including the list of best practices (Appendix R) may prove to be a useful tool that professors and schools can use to make improvements to their online courses to increase student perception of course relevance. Within this list (Appendix R), there are 42 practices listed, each of which could be used in isolation or in combination with other practices. It may be admissible

to say that schools and individual professors should develop actionable plans to convey to students that the online course will be relevant to them in terms of content, mediums used, and temporality. This study showed that even exceptional college professors who plan and intend to convey relevance may fall short during the implementation phase. This may indicate that training is needed to educate faculty on the importance of conveying the different types of relevance in online distance learning courses and evaluation is needed to confirm that the actions take place during teaching. Such training with aligned evaluation might prove to benefit online distance learning and in-person learning and could improve student satisfaction levels and plans to persist with their education.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The study has both theoretical and empirical implications that will be discussed in this section. The theoretical implications related to adult learning theory will be explored. Then I will articulate how the study corroborates or supports previous studies through descriptions of the empirical implications for the online learning platform.

Theoretical Implications

This study used the six assumptions of adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012) to frame data collected from exceptional college professors who teach online distance learnings courses. Through analysis I found that these professors share a profound respect for the students in their courses as adult learners, not child learners. These professor participants distance themselves from the role of an authoritarian parent. Instead they respect the lived experiences of their students and position themselves as passionate subject matter experts willing to share their experiences in order to help students where they are now and where they intend to be in their chosen future careers. These professors are not focused on teaching students to meet

hard due dates. Instead, they are focused on transferring practical knowledge to students in a way that the students find useful now and in their future. It may be appropriate to say that this study supports the need to use andragogy when designing online distance learning courses for college students, particularly with respect to experience and problem-solving orientation.

Empirical Implications

My findings addressed many of the topics highlighted in my literature review, including the use of an ostensive stimulus to communicate relevance to online distance learning students to promote positive student learning outcomes (Doud et al., 2020; Inan et al., 2017; Keller, 2009; Rabin et al., 2019; Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Waheed et al., 2016). Thus, this study corroborates previous research findings on perception of relevance and positive learning outcomes. Like other studies, this study shows the significant gravity held by perceived usefulness of course content and assignments. Belet (2018), Braten et al. (2018), and Keller (2009) found that students who understood what was in a course for them personally were more likely to engage in the learning process. The professors in this study used clear and direct language to tell students how the material in their courses would be useful to students.

It may be acceptable to say that this study extends the body of knowledge related to relevance, related to the use of ostensive stimuli, and related to the body of research reporting what exceptional college professors do that makes them exceptional. This study is unique in that it categorized relevance in terms of content, medium, and temporality. My identification of the communication methods the professors used as ostensive stimuli may make it easier for others to understand how to convey relevance in online distance learning courses using ostensive stimuli. Finally, this study only included the activities of exceptional college professors who were recognized with an award conferred to them based on objective evaluation of their work. This

may contribute to a deeper understanding of what these professors do that makes them exceptional.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study had some limitations and delimitations. I was limited by the response to participate in the study, resulting in a sample of 10. Some of the participants were from one large private religious university. A more diverse sample may have added interesting findings to the study. Additionally, some of the participants were teaching graduate level courses while others were teaching undergraduate level courses. There were also variations in the LMS used by the professors. LMS variation affects the artificial intelligence features available for the professors to use when teaching, and more details regarding the LMS used may have added additional findings to the study.

Considering the delimitations, I do believe that there is value to this study. I think that the rationale behind decisions made to extend the scope of the sample to include awards conferred by organizations who objectively evaluated professor work was appropriate. This decision proved invaluable to gathering participants' authentic educational experiences of teaching online distance learning courses.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations and delimitations of my study, I would highly suggest that future studies focus on researching a more diverse sample. Through this experience I learned that it is important when conducting research to seriously consider how large of a recruitment field will be necessary in order to successfully recruit an appropriate number of participants. I had been overly optimistic that award winners from the two large, well-known agencies, the DLC and the

DLA, would be willing to participate in this research study. As a result of this optimism, I had to invest time to request approval from the IRB to modify my recruitment plan.

Additionally, this study looked specifically at the lived experiences of the exceptional college professors. This study did not investigate the experiences of the students in these courses. Future research could focus on the lived experiences of the students attending courses taught by exceptional college professors to better understand how the students experience the courses and how this may influence their plans to persist with their studies.

Conclusion

This transcendental phenomenological study focused on the experiences of exceptional college professors to understand what these professors do to convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. The theoretical framework guiding this study was adult learning theory, which was used to clarify the relationship between course design and delivery and characteristics of adult learners. The findings in this study suggest that professors teaching online distance learning courses can use their posture and ostensive stimuli in the course design and delivery to convey to students that the course content and mediums used will be useful and valuable to the students now and in their future chosen careers. This study suggests that recognition and respect for these learners as adults may be critical to the learners' decision to engage in the course and persist with their studies. The professor participants in this study granted autonomy to their students, respected the lived experiences of their students, and encouraged students to connect the course materials to their real-world lives.

The use of an ostensive stimulus to communicate relevance to online distance learning students to promote positive student learning outcomes was demonstrated by the professors in this study. One example of an ostensive stimulus the professors in this study used is clear and

direct language to tell students how the material in their courses would be useful to students now and in their future. This action reinforces the significant gravity held by perceived usefulness of course content and assignments. This action is scalable and could be used with intention by professors to convey to students the temporal relevance of the course content.

A list of best practices was cultivated as a result of this research. This list includes practices these exceptional professors perform in their online distance learning courses to convey relevance to students. These practices address course design and delivery actions to reduce cognitive load; communication that is consistent, personal, authentic, and encouraging; assignments that are practical and personal; discussion board use that drives content association and student participation; and delivery of feedback that promotes learning and improvement. Many of the practices on this list are scalable and could be used by professors with an investment primarily of time. This could result in improved online learning experiences for college students without significant financial outlay on behalf of educational institutions.

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Appendix A

IRB Application

Submitted online via Cayuse: https://www.liberty.edu/graduate/institutional-review-board/ (Links to an external site.)

Appendix B

Granted Permission from Participant Organizations (DLA, DLC)

[redacted]

February 10, 2022 at 2:27 PM

[redacted] will be sending your request to our awardees.

[redacted]

See More from Keri A. Palasz

KP **Keri A. Palasz** February 10, 2022 at 2:08 PM

Re: [redacted]

To: [redacted]

Hello Dr [redacted]

It's been 30 days since we last spoke, and I wanted to check in to see if you or the [redacted] Board have any additional questions regarding my proposed research into best practices of award-winning professors who teach online courses. I am excited to conduct this research and to share the results. I look forward to hearing from you.

Keri

Keri Palasz, MS, RDN, LDN, Ph.D. Candidate Liberty University

[redacted]

See More from Keri A. Palasz

[redacted]

On Mon, Feb 7, 2022 at 11:50 AM Keri A. Palasz [redacted] wrote:

Hello [redacted]

Just reaching out to learn the time when this email will be distributed.

Thank you,

Keri

Keri Palasz

[redacted]

> On Feb 2, 2022, at 2:30 PM, [redacted] wrote:
>
> Hi Keri,
>
> Thank you for following up about the status of your request. I have good news. Our cabinet has approved your request and will send the email text you provided in Appendix B to past our award winners. I requested you be copied on the email or emailed directly when the message to award winners goes out.
>
> I wish you the best with your study! I'll be on [redacted] eave beginning Feb. 4, so if you have any questions, please follow up with my colleague [redacted] copied here). Her email address i[redacted]
>
> Best,
>
> [redacted]

Appendix C

Email Recruitment Text for Potential Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The purpose of my research is to deeply understand the lived experiences of exceptional college professors who program relevance into online distance learning courses. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, a college professor teaching online distance learning in America, and the recipient of an award for their work designing and implementing online distance learning courses for college students. Participants must speak enough English in order to participate in an interview conducted in English. Participants, if willing, will be asked to submit a copy of their personal teaching philosophy, participate in a recorded virtual interview and member checking to validate a transcript of the interview, and provide a link or copy of a recorded class lecture that was used during the time frame when the award was conferred.

It should take approximately 15 minutes to complete a short electronic survey and submit your personal teaching philosophy, approximately 60-90 minutes for the personal interview, 30 minutes to review the transcript, and approximately five minutes to submit your recorded class lecture link or file. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential and pseudonyms will be used for each participant.

To participate, please click on this link to the initial short electronic survey, which includes the consent form and screening tool. At the conclusion of this short electronic survey, you will upload a copy of your personal teaching philosophy into the survey as your answer to the final question. Upon receipt of your completed short electronic survey and teaching philosophy, I will contact you to schedule a personal interview provided that you qualify. Contact me at [redacted] o [redacted] for more information or if you have questions.

A consent document is attached to this email and will also be included in the short electronic survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to complete the short electronic survey. This survey includes signing the consent form, answering screening questions, and uploading your personal teaching philosophy. You may also attach the signed consent form to your completed electronic survey or email it to me at [redacted]

Sincerely,

Keri A. Palasz, MS, RDN, LDN
PhD Candidate, Liberty University
[redacted]

Appendix D

Participant Screening Survey

1) Are you a college professor who teaches or who previously taught online distance learning courses in America?
   a) Yes
   b) No
2) Have you been recognized as exceptional through receipt of an award conferred by an organization, college, or university?
   a) Yes
   b) No
3) Confirm that you speak enough English to participate in an interview conducted online in English:
   a) Yes
   b) No
4) Are you 18 years of age or older?
   a) Yes
   b) No
5) Provide your full name including credentials:
6) Provide the number of years to date teaching higher education courses:
7) Provide the name of the college or university where you teach:
8) Select the name of the award conferred to you:
   a) [redacted]Excellence and Innovation in Online Teaching Award
   b) [redacted] Outstanding Online Program Award

c) [redacted] Leadership in Equity and Inclusion in Online Learning Award

d) [redacted] *Online Learning Journal* Outstanding Research Achievement Award in Online Education

e) [redacted] Effective Practice Awards

f) [redacted] Early Career Excellence Award

g) [redacted] Fellows Program

h) [redacted] Hall of Fame Award

i) [redacted] 21st Century Distance Learning Award

j) [redacted] Outstanding Leadership Award

k) [redacted] Innovation Award

l) [redacted] Excellence in Teaching/Training Award

m) [redacted] Global Impact Award

n) [redacted] President's Award for Excellence

o) Other: (enter name of award and award issuer here)

9) Provide the year the award was conferred to you:

10) Provide your age:

a) 19-25

b) 26-34

c) 35-44

d) 45-54

e) 55-64

f) 65-74

g) 75+

h) Prefer not to disclose

11) Provide your gender:

a) Agender

b) Female

c) Male

d) Prefer not to disclose

12) Do you identify as:

a) Hispanic or Latino or Spanish Origin

b) Not Hispanic or Latin or Spanish Origin

13) Do you identify as (select as many as apply):

a) American Indian or Alaska Native

b) Asian

c) Black, or African American

d) Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander

e) White

14) Attach your teaching philosophy here (Microsoft Word or PDF):

Appendix E

Description of Research for Potential Participants

The purpose of this proposed transcendental phenomenological study will be to discover and describe exceptional college professors' experiences programming relevance into online distance learning courses. The theory guiding this study is adult learning theory (Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2012) as it clarifies the relationship that exists between course design and delivery and characteristics of adult learners, which are specified by Knowles et al. (2012) in six assumptions.

This proposed study will address four research questions: (a) What is the experience of exceptional professors who convey relevance in online distance learning courses? (b) What is the experience of exceptional professors who specifically convey that the content in the course is relevant to the adult students in the course? (c) What is the experience of exceptional professors who attract and hold attention of adult students in online distance learning courses? (d) What is the experience of exceptional professors who link course online distance learning course content to adult students' past, present, or future experiences?

Data collection for this proposed study will include exceptional college professor teaching philosophy statements, interviews, and observations of recorded lectures. Data is proposed to be analyzed and coded using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological model to reveal themes and patterns.

The goal of this study will be to curate a list of best practices used by exceptional college professors to convey relevance to online distance learners in a way that will appeal to adult learners.

Appendix F

Participant Informed Consent and Approval Form

Consent

Title of the Project: Best Practices of Exceptional College Professors Who Program Relevance into Online Distance Learning Courses
Principal Investigator: Keri A. Palasz, Ph.D. Candidate, Liberty University
Co-investigator: Christian Raby, Ed.D.

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 18 years old, a college professor in America, the recipient of an award for teaching excellence in online distance learning from an approved organization, and able to participate in an interview conducted in the English language. 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.

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

The purpose of this proposed transcendental phenomenological study is to describe specifically what exceptional professors do to convey relevance to students in online distance learning higher education courses. It is anticipated that this study will produce a list of best practices that may have practical use for other professors and instructional designers who work in online distance learning.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Complete a demographic survey and submit your personal teaching philosophy. It should take you about five minutes to email a copy of your personal teaching philosophy. The email should be sent to [redacted]
2. Participate in an audio- and video-recorded interview. This interview should take about 60-90 minutes. The interview will be conducted in the English language via Zoom and will be audio and video recorded so that an accurate transcript may be produced.
3. Review and validate the interview transcript. Once a transcript of the video has been produced, I will send a copy of the transcript to you as a Microsoft Word file so that you may validate the transcript. It should take you about 30 minutes to review the transcript

for accuracy. You may make corrections using the comment feature in Word. You will then return the approved transcript to me; with any corrections you recommend indicated in comments.

4. Submit a copy of a recorded class lecture. It should take you about five minutes to email a link to a published recording on a site such as YouTube or to email an attachment. The email should be sent to [redacted]

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive direct benefits from participating in the study. However, participants may experience the benefit of the ability to share best practices and to have your ideas recognized as best practices within the industry.

Benefits to society include the production of a list of best practices that will have practical use for professors and instructional designers who work in online distance learning. It is possible that this list of best practices may improve the design and delivery of online distance learning courses, resulting in students with better learning outcomes, greater levels of personal satisfaction, and lower levels of attrition. This study will also add to the body of literature that exists for online distance learning and for adult learning theory.

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. 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. 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 and any hard copy data will be shredded.

- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher[s will have access to these recordings.
- There are no foreseen limits to confidentiality. The researcher will not disclose participant identities or how named or identifiable individuals responded.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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 Keri Palasz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Keri Palasz at [redacted] or [redacted] You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Christian Raby, at [redacted]

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, [redacted] or email at [redacted]

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

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

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix G

Interview Protocol

Preparation

1. Secure and prepare space for conducting interview so that distractions are minimalized.
    a. Dress professionally
    b. Turn off cell phones
    c. Turn off email
    d. Turn off text messaging
    e. Post note on office door "Please do not interrupt; interview in progress"
    f. Bottle of water accessible
    g. Paper and pens for note-taking accessible
    h. Confirm internet access working and at appropriate speed
2. Practice epoche.
    a. Memo as appropriate.
3. Prepare technology.
    a. Set up Zoom to record audio and video
    b. Set up Evernote to record audio
    c. Set up lighting and camera so that participant can see me appropriately
    d. Have electronic and hard copy of this protocol and interview question guide accessible.
    e. Set alarm for one hour from start of interview

Introduction Script

Hello (insert participant first and last name)! Thank you for agreeing to meet with me today via Zoom. How would you prefer that I address you during this interview? (Write down response and use that specific name or appellation throughout interview).

My name is Keri Palasz, I'm a Ph.D. candidate from the Liberty University. The purpose of this interview is to learn about what exceptional college professors do to convey relevance in online distance learning classes. There are no right or wrong answers, or desirable or undesirable answers. I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think. If it is acceptable with you, I will be video- and audio-recording this conversation so that I can carry an attentive conversation with you. Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that what you say will be connected to a pseudonym used to identify you. I will be the only person on this dissertation team who will be aware of your answers. A pseudonym guide will be kept confidential but may be provided to my dissertation chair upon request. The purpose of this is so that we know whom to contact should we have further follow-up questions after this interview.

Build Rapport

1. Make eye contact with the participant.
2. Smile.
3. Write as few notes as possible. Remember that you are video- and audio-recording this interview.
4. Take a few minutes (no more than five) to establish trust and respect with the participant.
5. Address any uncertainty or apprehension that the participant may have.
6. Ask and be respectful of time constraints for the interview.

Ask Questions

1. Ask questions as written in interview question guide.

2. Ask follow up questions as appropriate for clarification or to probe deeply into an appropriate topic.
3. Repeat back answers if appropriate to help maintain rapport and to maintain momentum.

Closing Script

Thank you (insert appellation or name) for your time. You have been very helpful. Do you have any additional final thoughts on the interview? Do you have any questions for me? I will follow up this conversation with a "Thank you" email that reminds you to send a link to a pre-recorded class lecture. In about a week, when I have a formal transcript of this conversation, I will email you a copy of the transcript so that you may check it for accuracy. The file will be a Microsoft Word file, and you will be able to make changes or corrections using the "comments" feature in Microsoft Word. I will include instructions with the transcript to remind you. Thank you again for your time today.

Appendix H

Epoche Memo

March 23, 2022

Notes prior to personal interview with participant 9

Keri, listen with intent. Read the interview questions from the printed list. If appropriate, ask questions to dig deeper or to clarify something the participant says. Do not ask leading questions. Listen.

Notes post personal interview with participant 9

Interview with ninth participant reinforces what other professors have stated in various ways: for students to learn, they have to want to learn. And, the students have to apply novel concepts from the course in an active assignment that the students complete with passion because the students find the assignment will be useful to them now or in the future.

This application of novel course content in assignments that are designed to be practical and useful to the students is emerging as a common theme in these interviews. These professors are also giving their students the opportunity to personalize the assignment so that it carries more usefulness to the student. These professors want the students to connect the course content to the assignment AND to their own real-world lived experience. Many of these professors talk about helping the students project the assignment to their chosen future careers, which is an example of conveying temporal relevance (past, present, future).

Appendix I

Interview Questions

1. Please describe what you did that positioned you to earn an award for online distance learning. CRQ

2. Please describe what you do to gain and attract student interest in the online distance learning courses you teach. SRQ1

3. Please describe what you do to gain and attract student interest in assignments which are included in the online distance learning courses you teach. SRQ1

4. Please describe what you do to convey to students that the content in the course is important for them to learn. SRQ3

5. Please describe the mediums you use for learning objects (for example: YouTube videos, Google Forms Quizzes, etc.) and what you do to select these mediums. SRQ2

6. Please describe what you do to help students connect the information they are learning to their past and present experiences and to their future goals. SRQ3

7. Prior to this interview you shared a copy of your personal teaching philosophy. Tell me about this philosophy of yours. CRQ

8. Where did your teaching philosophy come from? CRQ

9. How has this philosophy changed over time? CRQ

10. Explain to me how you use this philosophy to guide your teaching. CRQ

11. Would you be willing to share with me a recorded lecture that you made for your students during the time that you were considered for the award that you won? CRQ

Appendix J

Observation Protocol

1. Complete bracketing exercise via journaling and memo writing in order to clear mind of bias and other thoughts that may be distractions.
2. Prepare the room and space so that the observation may be completed without interruption.

    2.1 Turn off cell phone.

    2.2 Turn off email/text alerts.

    2.3 Clear desk top except for paper and pens for note writing.

    2.4 Use headphones while observing to minimize outside noises and distractions.

    2.5 Close office door or place sign on door to alert others that I am not to be disturbed.

    2.6 Have beverage available on desktop.
3. Complete the form below, feeling free to draw sketches or write additional notes in margins and anywhere else as needed.

OBSERVATION OF RECORDED LECTURES

Participant Name/Pseudonym:
Title of Participant's Lecture:
Date of the Participant's Lecture:
Length of the Participant's Lecture
Observer's Name:
Date of Observation:
Time Observation Began:
Time Observation Concluded:

1. **Explain what you expect to be observing and why you are observing this artifact:**

2. **Describe the Setting including furniture, equipment, décor, noise level (note any changes to setting that may occur):**

3. **Describe who is present and how they present themselves (clothing, standing/sitting, wearing headphones, etc.):**

4. **Describe how the session begins:**

5. **Describe the chronology of events in 3-5 minute intervals (write down key words or phrases used):**

Minutes	Notes
1-5	
6-10	
11-15	
16-20	
21-25	
26-30	
31-35	
36-40	
41-45	
46-50	
51-55	
56-60	

6. **Describe how information is communicated:**

7. **Describe any nonverbal communication techniques used:**

   Writing on whiteboard
   PowerPoint slide (static)
   PowerPoint slide (animation)
   Pointing/Hand gestures

8. **Describe what the professor does to emphasize novel or important content:**

9. **Describe any technology or props used:**

10. Describe the professor's voice and tone:

11. Describe the professor's facial expressions:

12. Describe how the session closes:

Appendix K

Coding Protocol

1. Data collected will be uploaded into NVivo 13 for in-depth analysis using codes.

2. A code is generally defined as a short phrase or single word that that represents salient data.

3. Coding will be conducted and recorded in two cycles for each datum, creating a codebook (Appendix K):

a. Cycle One focuses on analyzing the data using holistic and provisional coding techniques.

b. Cycle Two focuses on synthesizing the data.

4. To identify emergent codes with appropriate focus, as I consider the data I will refer to my research questions and the six assumptions of ALT.

5. As appropriate, in vivo coding technique will be used to capture precise language used by participates that further illuminate their experiences.

6. Magnitude coding will be used as appropriate to track frequency and intensity of participant opinions.

7. Frequency data will be collected for words, word pairs, and codes, with refinement of tentative codes as the study progresses to produce codes that best condense, distill, or summarize the data.

8. A complete list of codes with descriptions will be created and maintained in a codebook during analysis (Appendix K).

After the data has been organized into codes, the codes will be analyzed and organized into groups to achieve horizontalization.

Appendix L

Codebook

Category	Code	Description
Content Relevance	Meaningful	Having a serious, important, or useful quality or purpose
Content Relevance	Useful	Able to be used for a practical purpose or in several ways
Content Relevance	Worthwhile	Effort or time is well invested related to importance
Content Relevance	Authentic	Realistic, of undisputed origin, genuine, accurate, reliable
Medium Relevance	Usability	Easy to use, known to participant, the degree to which can be used
Medium Relevance	Accessible	Already owned by the participant, able to be understood, obtained, or used
Medium Relevance	Contemporary	Popular in use today, belonging to or occurring in the present
Medium Relevance	Appropriate	Proper or suitable in the circumstances; matches to population
Temporal Relevance	Connected	Brings together Past-Present-Future or some combination of the three through establishment of a real or notional link
Temporal Relevance	Past	Pertaining to a former time
Temporal Relevance	Present	Pertaining to what is existing or occurring now
Temporal Relevance	Future	Pertaining to time that will follow, time that is yet to come
Temporal Relevance	Career	An occupation selected and undertaken for a significant period of time in a person's life; often a goal
Temporal Relevance	Academic	Related to education and scholarship
Temporal Relevance	Personal	Belonging to, affecting, or of a specific singular person

ALT Assumptions	Readiness to Learn	Student's intrinsic desire to learn, choice to attend classes
ALT Assumptions	Problem Solving Orientation	Students shift from rote memorization toward interest in solving real-world problems and issues, which increases interest and motivation.
ALT Assumptions	Need to Know	Adult learners see for themselves the difference between what they currently know and what they want to know, so they develop a new need for new knowledge.
ALT Assumptions	Motivation	Related to intrinsic and extrinsic factors, more emphasis on intrinsic factors for adult learners.
ALT Assumptions	Learner Self Concept	Learners are mature, independent learners who learn best in independent situations where they can work at their own pace.
ALT Assumptions	Experience	Learner lived past experiences and ability to activate these experiences for self-benefit.
ALT Assumptions	"Thank You"	Professor overtly professes a sincere "thank you" for the time students spend in the course and on assignments

Appendix M

Document Analysis Protocol

1. Participant Pseudonym:
2. Name of Document:
3. Document Total Word Count:
4. Epoche Comments
5. Reduction:

    ALT Codes:

    Emergent Codes:

    Meaningful Expressions:
6. Horizons Identified, Unique Y/N, Necessary Y/N, Abstractable Y/N, Label:
7. Clusters of Horizons based on commonalities:

    Content Relevance:

    Medium Relevance:

    Temporal Relevance:
8. Accuracy check of themes to confirm expression Y/N, compatibility Y/N

    Theme 1:

    Theme 2:

    Theme 3:

    Invalid Themes:
9. Individual Textural Descriptions (include direct quotes):

    Description 1:

    Description 2:

Description 3:

10. Imaginative Variation:

Variation 1:

Variation 2:

Variation 3:

11. Individual Structural Description of the document

12. Textural Structural Description of the document

13. Composite Description of the lived experience (based on xx documents):

Appendix N

Document Sample: Personal Teaching Philosophy

I am deeply passionate about teaching investment-related concepts. I am a firm believer that instructional passion helps the content come alive. It is my hope and desire that my excitement for course material creates a heightened interest level among my students. My teaching goals are to encourage students to be curious learners, to provide an atmosphere of experiential learning, and to stimulate critical thinking. My teaching efforts have been directly benefited by my research, which has revolved around topics relevant to the courses that I teach.

My teaching philosophy has evolved over time as a result of various books[1] on learning theory, seminars offered by [redacted], and personal experience. I use lectures to introduce new information and then use both in-class and out-of-class experiential learning exercises to foster an environment of discovery-based learning. As students apply classroom learning in a way that replicates real life, their interest levels and self-motivation increase more rapidly. I routinely make an effort to work with students one-on-one when they express curiosity on a concept that is related to my expertise even when it is not directly covered in my classes.

Student learning is deeper and richer when they get their hands dirty by applying concepts discussed in class to real-world data. Examples of this philosophy include deploying stock trading simulations, conducting financial ratio analysis using SEC filings, calculating options strategies using student-selected companies, and forming retirement planning projections using software that is actually used in the industry. I have also brokered opportunities for students to use software (usually pro bono) that they would use on the job. Examples include

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[1] My two favorites are "How Learning Works" by Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, and "Dynamic Lecturing" by Harrington & Zakrajsek

YCharts and Riskalyze for the stock simulations and MoneyGuidePro in my Retirement Planning class. These are all resume builders for students. Additionally, I include guest speakers in my Retirement Planning class to show students different sides of the industry. Beginning fall 2021, we are also doing a case study in coordination with a major financial planning firm in [redacted] in an effort to provide students with an Open Lab experience.

[redacted] has provided me with the opportunity to teaching both residential and online courses. I routinely bring lessons learned from one sphere to benefit the other. In my online classes, I have a feedback mechanism where students can tell me their *muddiest point* from a lesson. I use this feedback to improve both the online and residential content presentations. In addition, I have found asynchronous discussions in my online courses to be a good method to encourage critical thinking and reflection on targeted course-related topics. They also help students practice professional communication skills. Several students have commented on how valuable it has been for them to learn from their peer's experiences and to process course content in a more personal manner. Since this was such a success in my online classes, I am now using the same tool in my residential courses as well. I am also conducting research on student's self-reported value derived from the discussion forums in cooperation with Dr. [redacted]. Finally, I believe that I should be in a state of continuous improvement to both set an example for my students and to benefit them directly at the same time. I make an explicit effort to attend workshops, take online training, and read books that will help me improve in both pedagogical and practical skills.

Appendix O

Interview Transcript Sample

SPEAKER1	00:02	"Recording in progress." And I just wanted to share with you, and I'm going to read this, so that I don't mess it up. So my name is Keri Palasz. I'm a Ph.D. candidate from Liberty University. The purpose of this interview is to learn what exceptional college professors do to convey relevance in online distance learning classes. There are no right or wrong answers or desirable or undesirable answers. I'd like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think if it's acceptable with you. I will be video and audio recording this conversation so that I can carry an attentive conversation with you and not be scribbling notes through the whole thing. Everything you say will remain confidential, meaning that what you say will be connected to a pseudonym that will be used to identify you from here forward. I will be the only person on the dissertation team who will be aware of your answers for your personal identity. The pseudonym guide will be kept confidential, but if my dissertation chair requests it, I would then provide it to her. And the purpose of this is so that we both know who to contact if we had any further follow up questions after the interview. I sent thank you so much.
SPEAKER2	01:21	Certainly.
SPEAKER1	01:22	And thank you for sharing your teaching philosophy with me. I was, you know, it was interesting to read and already you're using some of the phrases that I'm going to be looking for as I conduct my qualitative research. So I'm really interested to talk with you. To clarify, in two thousand eighteen 2018, you received at the [redacted] University Annual Award for Excellence in Online Teaching.
SPEAKER2	01:49	I was actually a runner up, runner up, right? Yep. There were three people that were recognized a winner and two runner ups got two runners up. I guess that's the point.
SPEAKER1	02:01	And you've been teaching for 16 years?
SPEAKER2	02:05	Yes. And in this program, and prior to that, I did adjunct teaching at [redacted] College in [redacted]. I did that for about three years.
SPEAKER1	02:22	OK. All right. So without any further ado, I'm going to dive right in so that we can be respectful of your time. The first question is please describe what you did that positions you to be named a runner up for the award.
SPEAKER2	02:41	OK. This is kind of a long answer, but I teach in a master's program in adult education. It's adult professional and community education. And we had we're in the midst of some issues, social issues at the time that we're transitioning over from a face to face teaching to online teaching. And it was a time when Black Lives Matter was one of the primary things that was in the news at the time. And what I was charged with

doing was moving a course called Current Issues and Adult Education, from face to face over to online, and the on the face to face class was kind of static. And it talked about things like adult literacy and kind of constant sort of issues that we face. And I thought the timing of it, the upheaval that was taking place in the United States would be a good time to incorporate more contemporary issues like Black Lives Matter. But the challenge was to do that in an online environment because much of the online environments have been exposed to a very discrete, almost task oriented trainings, almost. So I wanted to address one or more complex issues during a semester long course in an online environment, and it was supposed to be asynchronous. So that made it even more challenging. So what I came up with was I used a kind of thinking about Bloom's taxonomy and thinking about issues. I came up with the sequential way of moving the students through lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy in terms of these issues, up to the point where they were constructing mental models and to a more complex graduate school level type learning activities and doing it without face to face guidance. So I set up a for each subject, set up a or each issue. I set up a three week sequence where they talked about where they found readings. They talked with each other about the readings and the issues. And finally, they assembled their thoughts in a paper and presented their thoughts on this issue, trying to move from lower level type learning activities up to constructing new knowledge towards constructing new knowledge, I guess, might be a better way of doing it. And I also thought about a sequential gathering of taking people through conversations that they were more comfortable with the ones that they were less comfortable with. So we started with women's issues at the beginning of the semester and then talked about Hispanic issues, and Black Lives Matter was the last thing that we talked about. And I primarily let them do the learning themselves and among each other kind of shepherded them through it. The first part of the semester, I gave them guidance on working with each other and being respectful and how to have difficult conversations. And I think that set down a little bit on the edge for the semester. But I think it really helps in terms of helping establish ground rules for conversations. And they have dialogue. And some of the conversations were a bit off the wall as far as I was concerned, but they probably think I'm off the wall too. So it was a very interesting sort of design for me to do and try to try trying to incorporate higher level graduate learning and an online asynchronous environment. Is an answer to your question at all?

SPEAKER1 07:06 Yes, yes. Yes, that's good. That's great. Was there any particular way that you grouped the people together?

SPEAKER2 07:16 Yes. The course was stacked it that you have to understand. I teach mostly at will all graduate students now. So there were there were actually two course courses there. The way [redacted] state does. It is a bit odd. Ph.D. students cannot take master's level classes, so we just created

		two classes and had the sessions together. So I made sure that there were there was at least one PhD student in each one of them, and one of their additional activities that they had to do was to mentor to people in terms of conducting and then participating in them and group learning. And also, they mentored things like finding particles and as some of those things that we normally would talk about in the classroom environment. And then I tried to break people up as much as I could to have a good, diverse group. But there's a limited amount of information that I have available for that in terms of establishing the group, like using last names. And that's a very faulty way of grouping people. And you can't really tell by somebody saying anything about them, really their genetic background or their political background, or their enthusiasm towards a particular topic or any of the things that you would like to use to group people. But that was the way I grouped it. And of course, it was. The random chance does not give you a balanced group of people, so some groups had more graduate. I have more Ph.D. students at the once did, and even then I tried to have at least one, a pretty advanced Ph.D. student in age group. Okay.
SPEAKER1	09:15	What do you do to gain and attract student attention in an online distance learning course? General question and attracts their attention, are there any specific things that you do? Clearly, you picked relevant topics.
SPEAKER2	09:34	Yeah. And one of the things that I want to do and one of the things I think is a real deficit is that the interaction between the professor and the student, so especially in an asynchronous environment, what I try to do is work with each one of the students. So I prepare videos all the time, a even for things like going over the syllabus and stuff like that. And each time they see me, they're going to hear me say, I'd love to meet with you. And it benefits you to meet with me. And because when you finish this, you're going to want people to write letters of reference for you. I give them a carrot. I tell them you'll get a lot better letter if I if I remember you. I probably shouldn't even write them if I don't remember them, but I can look at their work. But and I also, I think it benefits students just just to me. And then in the chat rooms and stuff like that, I will. I will actually extend the chats into an email conversation about their past experiences. I'm teaching them about education. These degrees are in education, so I can easily say, you know, I can talk to them about their past experience teaching, and people tend to light up when they talk about that as part of the reason why they're taking this curriculum. So I try to find a topic. My ex-wife used to say everybody has a bunch of buttons on their chest. And if you pressed press right button in the conversation, you don't have to do much else. You can let them do it. So that engagement that you're talking about is the right. But so sometimes I have to hunt for and sometimes I don't find it either. But I guess with every classroom situation.
SPEAKER1	11:39	What do you do to gain and attract student interest in assignments

		and try to make them different?
SPEAKER2	11:45	There's some of the things that have. Emerged over the last two years during COVID is that the students are so tired of chat rooms, they're so tired of reflections, the same old things. So what? I'm still. adjunct teaching, and in some ways, at least, maybe a little bit more innovative because I don't have all those faculty meetings, so I'm trying to develop new activities where it's a little different, it's a little bit more challenging. Like meth, an example is preparing their own video to share with the group and the issues more with some of the things that come up with is simply related to the technology and tried to figure out how we can have, I might be able to do a particular thing that I imagined. But a student may not have the bandwidth or the computer or the microphone or whatever else they might need or whatever sort of materials they might need. But that's true with any sort of innovative assignments.
SPEAKER1	13:09	When you when you give those video assignments, because these are education students who are going to go on to teach, do you ever say anything to them like “this will help you when you have to make video lectures later when you're teaching devastating?”
SPEAKER2	13:23	Yes, but I just don't limit it that way. And I can cheat a little bit because these people are a lot of them see themselves doing these online teaching things. So even not just the assignments, but anywhere through the semester. I'll say “I appreciate feedback from you guys are doing stuff and we'll learn together on how to improve it, doing online education.” If you have any and I also do training for engineers, and I think if you can set up a place where adults want to learn together and any college student is kind of an adult where people want to learn together, the learning is richer. I'm not much of a talking head where I sit there and I try to pour knowledge into somebody, and I don't think that that engages people in an online environment. I don't even think it engages them in a classroom environment, to be honest.
SPEAKER1	14:28	Do you for those assignments or any of them kind of like problem solving?
SPEAKER2	14:33	Oh, yes. Well, and I think that they the one with the issues was supposed to be problem solving. The way I presented it to them is that if you look at anybody that works with social issues and many other issues, but social issues, a large part of what they do is adult education. So what I want you to think about doing is try to imagine what steps you're going to take to problem-solving. If you're a nurse manager or if you're a social worker, how are you going to try to change things? And I add on top of that because there are graduate students, your leaders, you're not just learning how to teach. Yeah, I'm not teaching how to teach. I'm asking you to take leadership into education and use your skills and your privilege to to actually change society. And I said, we're not going to solve all the society's issues, but we can. We can make our

		little corner a little bit neater and tidier. So I try to challenge students in that way.
SPEAKER1	15:45	When you say “use your skills and privilege,” what do you mean by privilege? Are you also referring to their past experience and their gained bank of knowledge that they have because they're, as you said, they're already graduate students?
SPEAKER2	15:57	Yes. And plus I'm assuming that and most of our students do move into leadership positions, and any leadership position also has privilege associated with it. So I'm I write papers on leadership. But I think of educators as servant leaders. That's kind of the way and that comes up, and most of my classes do that. Our purpose is not to show the students how smart we are, but to help them grow and probably do better than we did. And hopefully, people have that attitude about their students.
SPEAKER1	16:43	Is are there is there a lot of variety, like do you have assignments that are turned in at all at the end of the semester or do you sequence them throughout the semester? Or do you have short assignments, summative assignments and assignments?
SPEAKER2	17:00	I mess that up sometimes. Yes, I try to have stuff every at least every two to three weeks this semester. I'm doing one and there's a big gap and people are aren't taking part as much. So I think that the frequent, frequent commitment to assignments is a driving force for participation communication.
SPEAKER1	17:29	If they're not turning things in the week things are due, Do you send reminder notices and things like that?
SPEAKER2	17:34	No, I don't send a reminder notes. I send them an email and I don't have great 200 students in a class. I've got 23. I think this time, but I send them an email and check in with them. It's kind of a form letter, to be honest, but I do modify and I say, I know you haven't turned this and you could still turn in even notice late or you haven't participated. One of the things that's frustrating about chats is if somebody is late on that, what do you do? So what I do is I force them to have a conversation with me. I said it's not the same and I'm not going to give you full credit, but I'm going to engage them again. I'm going to force them to engage. So it takes a little bit more time to do that. But at worst, my full load as a Ph.D. faculty member was two courses. So that's and they're not big courses. So you should be able to do that follow up for somebody that has this teaching chemistry online. I don't know how you would do that.
SPEAKER1	18:35	But you really take a personal approach? You contact the students individually, personally through email to give them that your personal attention, to get them more involved in completing their assignments and getting them done?
SPEAKER2	18:48	Yes, and the element of the learning management system will allow me to start that train, so I'll send through that. But when they respond back to it, I'll start. I'll switch over and start using the [redacted] email account to do it. So it doesn't seem like just the professors talking through Canvas, (the LMS system).

SPEAKER1	19:15	How do you convey to your students that the content in your course is important for them to pay attention to and to learn? How do you get them to decide, like, oh, this matters to me, I'm going to pay attention.
SPEAKER2	19:37	I don't know if I'm any good to have that, but both in the classroom environment and online. What I'll say is, visualize yourself 10 years from now and what role you are in. Are you going to need to be able to do this? If you will need to be able to do this when you're faced with this again in the future, the experience of doing it now will help you then. Take, for example, program planning. Program planning is one of the more daunting, boring things that I teach, but I talk about being able to manage projects. And even if you're not planning an educational process, a lot of the stuff that we talk about in program planning is useful to think about times in your life where you've had to plan out something like an educational program or any sort of activity that similar and think about the skills that you had and use this opportunity to improve it. So when you're faced with this again, that will help you.
SPEAKER1	20:38	So you don't tell them this is going to be important for you to learn and pay attention to the future.
SPEAKER2	21:01	I let them decide for themselves, for the future career that they're choosing for themselves, "Will this matter to me?" Because if they decide that for themselves, I believe it more carries more weight than if I tell them this matters, pay attention. And they realize, Oh, this is important for me. I do this, and I guess, a fault of mine is that I'm a very practical person. My background is engineering, and I like the utility of learning, and some of my peers are very much into the theoretical side of it. But even the theory based stuff that we teach most of - a lot of - the student the students would like to be in the academics. And so I talk about how they're going to use this and more immediately. One of the things I can cheat with the Ph.D. students is you'll need this, perhaps in terms of designing your research and your dissertation. So I always have some utility that's based into what I teach, and I don't know if that's good or not, but I think it's helps engage the students if they say, you know, I always hear people saying, How am I ever going to use calculus? You know, K through 12 or even undergraduates say that I can show you how you can use it, but I don't have to. I'm focused on education or research or whatever the courses I'm teaching. And the issue, of course, for example, even if they didn't end up in education, is as useful because almost all of us will have to deal with social issues. I don't I don't see how you go through life without having to deal with some of the issues that we talked about. On the other thing I did at the end of the semester to help with the engagement is I had each one of them write a final paper about an issue that's important to them and make a presentation to the other students about that issue and why it means anything to them. So we also in an education program, you try to get people to be educators during the actual learning experience, and that's harder to do in an online environment to.

SPEAKER1	23:17	It is it creates a whole new set of challenges for teachers. The online environment. Can you describe the mediums that you use for learning objects like do you use? I know you said you're on canvas. Do you use panopto? Do you use Kultura? Do you self-publish your videos out to YouTube? Do you do audio files, podcasts, all of the different technology? Do you use PDF files? Do you use Google spreadsheets? Do you use Google Forms?
SPEAKER2	23:49	I don't use a lot of Google products, and it's not because I don't like them or anything like that. I just haven't used them and other aspects of my life. But what I'll do is the primary thing that I do is I'll use Zoom or some way of recording videos. And then we have a thing called media flow that will publish them and make them streaming. We also. I'm blocking on the name of it, but I closed caption. Everything is funny just being my age. It's nice to have closed captions, but nothing wrong with my hearing, but that is very helpful. I think sometimes because I don't. My ex-wife said, I mumbled, so it would help. In that case, the I use a lot of PowerPoints. I use a lot of graphics.
SPEAKER1	24:57	So interactive graphics like things that are explaining things or images and photographs.
SPEAKER2	25:04	I like to draw concepts, so I draw that using Visio or PowerPoint, but PowerPoint frustrating to me, but I use Visio to draw models, for example, and present those. And sometimes I'll scan stuff from a book and incorporate it. But I worry about the copyright stuff, and I think it looks kind of tacky. So I like to to. And sometimes I simplify it or add thinks there are particular to our discussions.
SPEAKER1	25:47	What would you use for your chat? You said you have the students do chats.
SPEAKER2	25:51	Well, it's built into Canvas.
SPEAKER1	25:52	The Canvas built-in chat.
SPEAKER2	25:58	Oh, use wiki also. And that's built in as well. Okay. I'm pretty basic on this stuff, but I haven't really used all the tools that are available. Like I said, we used to have a different product called tracks. I forget what it was based on, but it was a lot like Blackboard. And then we switched over to the Canvas and I'm still learning that it's we live for somebody that works in a college of education. We don't do a really good job of educating people, and technology is kind of like sink or swim. So I've been watching videos and stuff like that, and I've only used it for like. I guess two classes now, this is all that used to for, so I'm kind of having to relearn stuff
SPEAKER1	26:55	when you put assignments up there, do you post them as word documents, as PDFs or do you type them directly into canvas?
SPEAKER2	27:04	The assignment? Most of the assignments that we generate? Well, the paper assignments. I've started using the tools and canvas. It allows me to create an assignment on canvas. And I do that. I used to always have a paper copy. I had a rubric built in it. I've also started using the rubric ability this and campuses. This semester, I found it's a heck of a lot

more flexible than anything I'd ever imagined. You know how students love rubrics, but I I give them guidelines on everything, on the formatting, on the submission, and I allocate meet out. This is the engineer and me. I made out the point Senate. I don't I don't know if they like that or not, but they stop complaining. For the first few years, I thought people would complain that, that they didn't know what we wanted in assignments. And there's still a lot of people in the program that complain about some of the professors that I didn't know what she was looking for. Everybody else is a female. So I just my point is the learning, not them figuring out what I'm talking about. So I try to be real specific about it. And so I give them a rubric that the scraps that form. And then I look at the substance when it comes to the chart assignments. I create a a web page and I talk about the issue. And then there's a link to the chat room and it has the the header or the first posting in there. And I have them respond to it. I haven't had. The needs to break people out groups since we went to campus. So the next time I teach the course, I won an award for I will break. I'll have different groups within that to break out for the chat. But it's almost like counting, you know how you break things apart and set things up. And it's as fun as challenging, trying to figure out how to use tools to make it straightforward for the students to understand. I think a lot of students, when they come in to an alums for an online course, it's like, What the blank do I do? Where do I go? You know, I have little munchkins to say, Follow the Yellow Brick Road. I'll leave it. That might be a light, little nice, little graphic they have. But so I try to make it like that. I've never thought of myself as a munchkin, but I try to make it explicit. There's the first thing I see is there's a start here and there's an intro and I talk about the rest of the way I've structured the class I've got in canvas. This time I found that I can use learning modules and I could put everything in just everything, and I'm still figuring out how the web stuff in there. And I set it up with a sequenced order. So module and the way I typically do it is I do it on a weekly basis. I think humans work better with that sort of. If things are sequenced with things that make sense in our life, so I wouldn't do it on a day schedule or something like that. But the modules are on are each seven days or something like that. It might be two weeks as opposed to one week. And then within the module, the steps are numbered and sequence and ordered when it's presented to them so they know which ones to do and which order.

SPEAKER1 30:57 And so for each assignment, you set up its own web page within canvas so that when the students get there, there's then a numbered list and they know exactly how to progress through/ what to do to complete the assignment. All of the detailed instructions are there for them in that particular assignment page in canvas.

SPEAKER2 31:15 Yes, all that they need is there as well as I can think of it, the problem with the system is usually may not the system I'll think of. I'll get a follow up question. And that's another thing that I do is when somebody

		catches me in a mistake, I'll send out an announcement and I'll I don't say any found that I'm a mistake. But I said one of the students pointed out that this and that and I'm sorry about that. Here's the answer for it. I fixed the syllabus or whatever the issue is. And thank you very much for doing that. And let me know if you see anything else because I want them to know I make mistakes. I know I make mistakes. And please let me know we'll fix it before they get real frustrated. Oh gosh, it's so frustrating to the students to when they have a professor that won't admit to making mistakes. It's just amazing that somebody like that. But it's like we, you should have known better. It's like, No, they should. Why do you say that? And if they should have known better, you should have gotten it right? But yeah, I just I'm always willing to admit that I make mistakes. Nobody seems to care. Nobody expects anybody be perfect.
SPEAKER1	32:34	Do you ever include an example of an assignment from a previous semester?
SPEAKER2	32:39	Yeah. Yes, I do. And I wish that I did it more. But it seems as frustrating to me as seems like I'll teach a class. And then it'll be three years till teachers again. And maybe their summers have changed my mind or something like that. But I try to include what's the word for that? An exam, an example exemplar or something like that. But after I've been able to do that and it really helps.
SPEAKER1	33:12	Sounds like you're making the most of canvas and learning your way through it. I know I've switched LMS. I think I'm on my fourth one now, but bless your heart. And being a professor. And so because I'm a student and a professor, I feel your challenge. I understand it. But it seems like you get better the more you stick with it. So there's I always look at the elements like my brain, like how much am I using really?
SPEAKER2	33:40	And you asked about other tools and your canvas has a lot of external tools attached to it, at least in our application of it. And then Texas state has a really good support system for this online education, and they have exemplars and of course, is out there that have been built and they also have other external tools that you could use. This is how to learn media flows just by doing that. It's like when I first heard about it, it's like, What is that? Why do I need that? And some of these tools seem like that, too. So as time goes by, I will pick up on further things unless they change over to another [redacted] in which case I'll have to go back to the home, go back to to go and start over again.
SPEAKER1	34:38	You mentioned you use a lot of video, do you ever do any files that are just audio-only, just kind of like podcasts or just an announcement where it's just a recording of you speaking? Or do you always do the video?
SPEAKER2	34:49	The video. And I think it's my age and my wife and I were traveling and I forget who we were talking to. She said, I only know what a podcast is, and I know one what one is, but I don't listen to a lot. So I tend to think the video better. I don't I haven't even thought about this in

		podcast a lot, but it might be less frustrating to the students because they don't have the. Had the screen up, they could just listen to it in the car or something like that.
SPEAKER1	35:24	When you record your videos, are there any guidelines for yourself that you follow? As far as like what they look like or how long they are?
SPEAKER2	35:33	Yes, I think the video should be no longer than a good sermon, and a good sermon should be no longer than five to six minutes. A priest told me that one time and I told his successor that he had said that, and he's like, Well, he's wrong. I'm going to talk as long as I want to, but it's like, I think the five to six minutes works well for four things and the interesting our instructional technology people said the same thing when we were first went through the training. I'll do it on that stuff and you get a lot of stuff in five to six minutes. Mm hmm. And what I usually have is this semester I kind of got this got dumped on me kind of quickly. What they had was they had a professor quit at the last minute. And so. They asked me to do it, so I'm having to do this throughout the semester, so the videos aren't as polished or complete. So what I will do is it's not just me talking. I have a graphics or PowerPoint. It's not as nice as I would normally do, but at least I have that up there. And so again, going back to church, there are people who sit there and take the bulletin and cross off so they know how much longer they have to go before they can go to go out for lunch. But so I let them know how long it's going to take and not like they can see what issue I'm talking about. And it serves as a reminder for me to as I'm going through and lecturing at this. This semester is not my best course, but I just didn't have as much time to prepare for it. And I've taught the course many times before, but it was always face to face, and the last time was six years ago. So it's an adult learning theory. So it's I should have spent more time fixing it and I would have if I go down and this is another thing we went through. Conversion of the curriculum to online with a thought process that we were going to reuse all this stuff. Right. And it doesn't seem like anybody who's reused any of it. It just seems like a such a shame because we were given a release each semester to prepare these things. And I asked to see those files for this course, but they didn't have them. They were still over on tracks or no one had any of them. So it's been kind of frustrating.
SPEAKER1	38:34	Do you think that having to rerecord the videos each semester for the class gives you the opportunity to program in contemporary examples that might increase the usefulness to students?
SPEAKER2	38:46	Honestly, honestly, I think what I'm going to do is always rerecord the videos. I don't think that's a problem. But it'd be nice to have the slides or the materials or the even the assignments from prior courses as opposed to have to start from scratch every semester. And that's why I had to do this type. This course has been taught three times prior online, but there was always on tracks and nobody knew where the the tracks file was. And it just I don't know. I don't. I'm retired now, I don't that I

		probably would have traipse up to it and bugged them about it if I was still there full time, but.
SPEAKER1	39:32	OK. You mentioned this a little bit in an earlier question, but I want to address it again just as a separate question in and of itself because it's important. Describe what you do to help the students connect the information they're learning to their past, their present and their future experiences and goals.
SPEAKER2	39:55	It will depends on the topic. If it's a social issue and there's a lot of social issues that are in adult education, what the way I try to get them to connect it to it is to have them think back on things. It's one of the primary skills for adults to have, according to adult education is critical self-reflection. And I always say that and they during the semester that and the reason I say that as I want people to think on their past experiences and build on it. And we often talk about that during the semester. I also try to get people to visualize what they're going to be doing in 10 years, which is problematic itself. And I'll talk about that in a second. And but I try to think about how they can apply these things. Many of these students, but one of the common topics I'll have when people come to my office or came to my office would be, I don't know where I'm going to, I'm going with this. So it's hard to connect the topic to their future activities per se. So and plus I had adult education students are very diverse. So what I do is I have to have them connect. When I'm talking about to the future is I will talk about specific ways that applies in different fields. For example, program planning program planning. I mentioned the nurse supervisor. So will I'll talk about how a nurse supervisor will do program planning for the in-service education that that she wants to have for her nurses best and hopefully students can think about that. But also another area that we go into is policy. So how has how to use the stuff you learn program planning for policy? Well, policy shapes program planning. So I asked, I have people visualize planning programs in the face of policy restrictions. And I would say when you get to that, I jump over and say, when you get into a leadership position and you're setting policy, work with the people that are the educators to make sure that it agrees with them. And Texas, there's kind of a thing where the tail wagging whacks dog. The legislators tell us to do all these things that they don't necessarily make sense from a theoretical basis in education. They're more satisfying political needs. It's probably that way in a state, but policymakers are the people that work between the people in power and the people actually do the work. And so I try to have people visualize applying some of the skills from program planning, even if you're doing policy work. And so I try to use different examples from a diverse. Array of future lives, because I can't focus on any particular one type of job. It's not like I'm training people to be nurses and training them to be adult educators or leaders in adult education and or researchers.

SPEAKER1	43:45	You've recognized that even though these are adult learning students, graduate students, Ph.D. students that they still sometimes have issues connecting what they're learning to a future use or future needs. Absolutely fine to really talk that through and walk that through with them as a class or as individuals to help them develop a greater respect for the content and realize "this is relevant to me. It matters to me. I need to pay attention and learn this."
SPEAKER2	44:13	Yeah, and a really good example of how I try to handle that diversity. Part of it is the first assignment this semester, and learning theory is as talking about experiential learning, right? And learners build on the experience. And so their first assignment was to write a reflection paper as an adult educator. Think about what you're planning to do when you when you grow up and how can you conceptually use these things you've learned about adult learners as an adult educator in the future? So I ask them to try to apply. The learning is funny. People taking this course, they conflate learning and education. And I that's my video talks about that. It's like it's not the same thing. But the difference between the two reflects your role as an adult educator, you're actually going to facilitate the learning. And that's really what adult education is. It's facilitating learning. And how can you build on somebody who's experiences to help them learn and so they actually have to visualize their future. I want people to think back on their past experiences and build on that. Some of them don't know what they're going to be doing five years from now. They're just trying to advance, and that's perfectly understandable. When they cannot project into their future I tell them to look at your past experiences and how would you implement what you've learned in the last two weeks to improve the outcomes. So I sometimes I can't deal with the future I had to deal with the past week.
SPEAKER1	46:20	Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Yep. And I think that's excellent. Excellent. Prior to this interview, you shared a copy with me of your personal teaching philosophy, and the teaching philosophy is one of the things you focused on. There was a collaborative environment and stimulant stimulating critical reflection, which is what you were just talking about. You also mentioned that the students that you teach tend to be a little older, and they have been as students previously. They have a wide variety of perspectives, experiences, abilities and demands on their time. And then you talk about how the constructs that you're teaching and examining with the students are not universal truths. They're complex, and they can have different meanings to different students. Was this something you always believed, or was this a philosophy that has evolved over time and after over six years of teaching has started to evolve?
SPEAKER2	47:17	The reason I went back to get a Ph.D. was just to get more money. As a teacher, I was planned to teach at a community college. The you could get more if you had a Ph.D.. So I also was very interested in the people and the chemical plants that I worked at, the learning and how they

learned or didn't learn. And how could we improve that? So I went and got a Ph.D. in adult education, and the first semester was history philosophy of adult education. Engineers are taught that there's a best way of doing things, and that's just not true. There may be a best way from an accountant accounting standpoint or may be a best way from an engineering standpoint. There may be a best way in terms of developing future employees or whatever. It really depends on what your goals are, and because there's more than one goal, there's more than one best way to do anything. Well, the same is true for the problems that we have, but I didn't believe that before 1998 and I went to a class and there was the very first class and adult education at University [redacted] and was taught by a black professors gay. And it was one of his first semesters. And there are about 20 of us in there and this is deep south and there was a black gentleman there from Africa, and he said the class was five hours long at the top. He said I really don't understand race and the United States can simply explain that to me and guy. The professor said. You're not going to do it. I'll let you all handle that. So we talked about it for two hours and I was mostly quiet, but I was just flabbergasted at the whole thing. We're having this discussion about race and the issues of it, and it ranged from some white dude saying Some of my best friends are black to a black woman talking about being a single mom at age 15 and having to try to struggle through. And she struggled very well. Obviously, she was on a Ph.D. program through finishing high school and taking care of her children and her family and stuff like that. And I was just like, and then Guy finished it up talking about he'd gone jogging in [redacted] that day and he was wearing a sweat suit and he went in a 7-Eleven or whatever it was at the end of it to get a Slurpee or whatever. And so he was looking at the magazines and the guy was watching him and he says, you know, just to sum it up, I won't tell you to. The guy may have been watching me because he was curious about why I was so sweaty. Or he may have been watching me because he thinks I look like somebody knows or he may have been watching me because he said I'm black and I might steal a magazine. That's it. And he said the white people in here never have to think about that. That's one of the aspects of race in the United States, and I've talked about a bunch of them. But there's a lot of different aspects to it. And that's the thing that struck me is that there aren't universal truths to things. And I've had people coming into the Ph.D. program for 14 years, and there's first semester of many of them come in thinking that there is an ultimate truth. You can always find the answer to something if you look hard enough. And it seems like the first step to them getting through the semester is to get them to admit that that there is not an ultimate truth. Or at least we don't know what it is, but we could talk about it and we can look for it. But if we don't talk to each other, we'll never get closer to it. It's just. Striking to me that having people being able to deal with the different perspectives of other humans is one of the

		most important things in almost any hack activity that goes on. And as one of the things that adult educators are gifted and fortunate that they can help people do that. But anyway, I don't even know if I even touched on the question.
SPEAKER1	52:02	It was all good, all good. Your teaching philosophy: has that changed at all over time? You said you've really started putting that together back when you were taking your Ph.D.. Has it evolved a little bit or have you just become more committed to focusing on critical reflection and collaborative environment?
SPEAKER2	52:22	I've thought we had one class in [redacted] where the professor in [redacted], I think at [redacted], told us that the critical reflection was the most important thing that you could teach adults. So I've had that in my mind, but I didn't make it part of my teaching philosophy at first. Most of what I was doing was learning how to teach and the planned and making sure I've had the readings and all that stuff. But I would say in the last. Gosh, I've lost track of time. The last 10 years has been a key part of it, but it has evolved over time. It continues to evolve. And one of the things that at first I was for focused on was like the form like you need to turn these things in on time and things like that. And I tell the students now that when I'm focused on is the learning and facilitating their learning and, you know, meeting obligations is a critical part of things. But you're in graduate college. You don't. I really shouldn't have to expect you to tie your shoes and turn in your papers on time. And we're all adults. And some of the things that have happened to our students are just incredible. Things do happen and people are late. I do take off for it, but it's not the most important thing. As long as the learning takes place, that's what I care about.
SPEAKER1	54:05	So when you're grading assignments, you grade your syllabus for lateness.
SPEAKER2	54:20	You're more concerned that the students are demonstrating learning than that they're demonstrating the ability to drop the paper in Canvas before 11:59 p.m. on Sunday night. Yeah. One of my pet peeves is I say, turn it in a word doc, not a PDF. But I don't. I take off three, maybe three percent for something like that. But. I'm sitting here doing math in my head, but it's all in the river. I allocated out like that and the things that I want them to focus on. And also, if you look at the rubric, I break it out by topics. And if you if you if you're headings in your paper match the the areas in the rubric. That's a great head start on meeting my requirements. It makes it so much easier for me to read. But I try to be fair about that because you get some students that are complex thinkers and I don't want to penalize them.
SPEAKER1	55:15	If you ever give them a template for the papers they submit, the headings are in there and already match the rubric?
SPEAKER2	55:19	Just their dissertation. I don't do it for papers. I will give them an exemplar actually. I have given them one with the headings in it, but that is for a there's a class that we teach in writing your proposal and I'll

		be pretty specific about that and I'll modify it based on whether they're doing qualitative research or quantitative research. And that has changed over the years, too. OK. OK. But I've never thought that one on one, that would be it. I don't know. Would that be challenging? I think it would be that's a challenging class to begin with, but I think that's fine. It's interesting. I don't know how they handle that.
SPEAKER1	56:14	I've been taking my whole doctorate online, so professors are finding ways to do it, but I agree with you it is challenging and for some of the courses we've had, even though it's an asynchronous course, there's a required once a week meeting that you need to come to and there are no points deducted if you don't come, but you're just going to miss critical information. Yeah.
SPEAKER2	56:36	You know it. It's interesting, really. I've loved working with these students. And the thing about one of the problems with education is particularly true for online education is everything is compartmentalized, right? Well, writing a dissertation is kind of a big deal. So what I do, what we do in our program is we have preparations for them doing the dissertation built into a lot of the different classes. We actually added a class on lit review, which I wish I had had. I would have hated class to start my favorite thing. But I teach still teach the methods class for quantitative research. And what I have them do is to pick their topic and the usually in their first year or at the end of their first year during the summer. And I had them prepare chapters one, two and three, and I give them that layout. And I've done this one online, too. I do give them a template on that for each chapter, and I give them assignments and I take them through it throughout the semester. When I get the lit review, it's like then a miracle occurs and then you jump down to the method. But we have a different class for that. I don't really I have them developed just the topic areas. I show them been diagrams and conceptualize the topics that they're going to cover on that and talk about how you do a lit review on that. But they're going to see a lot more of that throughout their curriculum. So I don't spend a lot of time on it, but I do focus on on the methods part and developing research questions.
SPEAKER1	58:32	Would you say that giving the students a template, the template frees them up to focus more on the content and less on the formatting?
SPEAKER2	58:39	Absolutely, yes.
SPEAKER1	58:40	You see a higher quality content, higher quality learning when they don't have to struggle with putting the document together, they just know like, OK, this goes here, this goes there?
SPEAKER2	58:50	I haven't done an experimental analysis of it. There's so much variability in the quality of the papers that are turned in. I don't know if it leads to it. But I think conceptually, I think it does. I hope that it does. I get less questions. So maybe that means that is helping them focus on the content.

SPEAKER1 59:16 In general, do you think that you tend to get students in your classes who find the courses that they're taking to be meaningful and relevant to them? Or do you occasionally get a student where it's just like the students in the wrong class and you both realize like this student is not interested in this, or is not going to have a use for this? Does that happen? Still, because you're teaching advanced level classes, so it might be minimized?

SPEAKER2 59:43 No, it does happen because we have. And students, the students that are in our program, if they haven't found the class is interested, what we've done is we've modified their programs the way that our programs 22 years old now, but it's morphed over the years and we've changed the curriculum, some on the basis of students not finding things useful. Are the professors not finding it useful in terms of helping the students learn? But so for the most part, the classes are the students are really engaged with the exception of maybe program planning. But even that I try to, I'm looking forward to teaching that again. I'm going to try to make it oriented towards wherever they are or have been recently. But we get students from other majors and some of them just they don't know what it's about. The one this semester is it's a small master's program, so we normally don't have that many students. But this semester we had 60 something. And some of the students are from other areas or they're minoring an adult education, or they think that we have two students from a physical phys ed or whatever it is that kinesiology, I guess, is what it is from that master's program as they're there. They don't find it as interesting or as useful as some of the students in the majors, because I think it's a weakness with the way we can do things. We'll talk about this will build on learning from other classes and for people from an outside program taken, it doesn't have the opportunity to build on that stuff before, so it's harder for them to connect with what was going on in there. It's not bad. It's the worst one I've seen as people coming in that first semester and to the Ph.D. program, and we have discussions about different ways of knowing. And we've literally had people that drop out after three weeks because the concept of postmodernism is so foreign to them that they just can't deal with it. But now most of the classes are fine. But you can see that some of the other programs we're talking about different terms, different models, different authors. Somebody from I was going to say criminal justice, but oddly enough, the criminal justice people seem to do fine in our programs. I think they're always dealing with adults and the issues with adults learning and education.

SPEAKER1 01:02:59 How do you how do you measure that student perception of usefulness? Do you actually have a survey that the school sends out?

SPEAKER2 01:03:16 We don't do it in our program, but the instructional technology people have set it up so that there's a survey that we asked the students to take for every class and they give us the feedback, the tabulated feedback on it. So we do an evaluation and we do an event. Yeah, they still do an

online evaluation and we see that published, but that's almost one of those smile sheets. But the one from instructional technology does have questions related to that. I think that. Because we're dealing with these small faculty, we're dealing with a small group of students. They tell us about the utility of the classes, but the people outside the program, we don't get that feedback.

SPEAKER1 01:04:14 OK. All right. Thank you so much for all of your time and all sharing all of your information, this has been extremely valuable to me. I really appreciate this. If you do think of any professors that might be interested in participating in the research who you know have been runners up or award winners for awards who teach online, who are doing some of the things you're doing to help students connect, make a connection between the usefulness of what they're learning and something that happened in their past or something that might happen in their future. You know, that relevance issue is definitely what I'm going to focus in on as I. Jump through everything here, and I'm also going to bounce all of the concepts off of Noel's adult learning theory assumptions. So at this point, I will put together a transcript of this interview and I'll return that to you hopefully within seven days, just so that you have the opportunity to make any corrections to anything, or you can correct anything you'd like to correct and then just give me your approval that it's good to go so that I can load that up into in-vivo and start coding it from there. [redacted] And then if you could share with me and I'll follow up with you with an e-mail to your email address and I have your email address as [redacted]. Yes, I'll send you an email which will prompt you to complete the. Transcript review that which will probably come in the next seven days. And then if you can send me a link to a recording, a recorded lecture. That's how third piece of data that I'm triangulating, so I'm basically going to be bouncing your teaching philosophy against the information gleaned from this interview against your classes, and I'm going to be looking for connections between those three data points as they apply to relevance, as I've defined it in my dissertation and then also as it applies to the six assumptions of adult learning theory from novels.

SPEAKER2 01:06:35 OK. All right. And I was making a face because a lot of the files were on tracks, but they're all still on media flow. So I've got them all, and I think I've probably got on. The hard draft is a hard drive anymore. Anyway, I got all my piece this in Dropbox, I guess, but I should be able to do that just fine. Now what are you looking for a really good one or are you looking at? Ideally, I need one. Well, this is a quantitative researcher, a random one, but you want really good one or you want a stinky one? I could give you either.

SPEAKER1 01:07:13 I prefer to have a really good one versus a stinky one. When you think one where you think that you're hitting on those points from your teaching philosophy, a lecture where you think you're mentioning critical self-reflection or where you're at, it might be a video that we

were talking about an assignment. And that's fine. That's perfectly fine, because that's appropriate.

SPEAKER2 01:07:36 OK. Yeah, I will look forward to getting the transcript. I also want to tell you, while you're still recording that if you need to talk to me again about anything you said, this is early on. Sometimes in qualitative research, things change a little bit as you move through it. But if you need to touch base with me or they have another meeting, just let me know.

SPEAKER1 01:08:00 Thank you. Thank you for that so much. I really, really appreciate that.

SPEAKER2 01:08:04 Okay. Yeah, I do. Well, we've all been through research, so we are glad most of us are glad to help people finish.

SPEAKER1 01:08:13 Thank you. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

SPEAKER2 01:08:16 What do you hope to do when you finish?

SPEAKER1 01:08:18 So I am teaching online. I'm also a registered dietitian.

SPEAKER2 01:08:22 Oh, good.

SPEAKER1 01:08:23 And so I teach online nutrition classes right now for undergraduate students, and I would really like to continue teaching online. I really enjoy teaching nutrition. I'd be happy to teach undergraduates or to teach at the graduate level, but my Ph.D. is in instructional design.

SPEAKER2 01:08:41 Good. Excellent.

SPEAKER1 01:08:42 My first two degrees are in nutrition and I wanted to expand. Not that there's not more for me to learn about nutrition. There's a lot more for me to learn about nutrition, but I wanted to become a better online educator and I realized that the way to do that really is to dig into the instructional design piece, because that's where you're actually really taking all of the technology that's available over here and matching it either to the pedagogy. If you're using Bloom's taxonomy or the Andrew G. If you're going to go that route with rote learning and try to make it fit so that it works for the students, and there's a lot more to it than just, you know, because you're doing it, there's a lot more to it than just standing in front of a video and recording a lecture. It takes a lot more to it. You need to do the closed captioning. You know, you need to provide the transcripts. You need to think about how long like you are doing, thinking about how longer the videos, where the PowerPoints look like. And there's lots of pieces that go into this so that students. You attract their attention and you hold it even just for that six minutes.

SPEAKER2 01:09:46 Yes. Yeah. And that you mentioned Bloom and I did two people in our program kind of spit on the ground when you when you mentioned Bloom, because it's it, it's so. Actually learning Typekit and not actually learning, but action oriented. But I still even in the semester for adult learning theory, I taught them about blimps. I said, [redacted] And if you don't use, it is hard to get to the Andrew Koji part of it. So the people still all learn the same. They start the same place, basically, and hopefully moves through those different levels. But I I think you have the right approach

		in terms of both of them. [redacted] So anyway, I could talk about myself all day long, but I'll let you go.
SPEAKER1	01:11:00	Well, thank you so much and I will send you an email. And then the transcript will come within seven days in a separate email. And if I find I want to dig into a particular concept, more with you as I'm collecting my data, I will reach back out. I appreciate you giving you that opportunity.
SPEAKER2	01:11:16	One other request when you finish, if you remember, send me an email. And because I'd like to see the finished dissertation,
SPEAKER1	01:11:26	I will do that
SPEAKER2	01:11:27	and is just interested in and I thought that this is really neat.
SPEAKER1	01:11:32	I will. I will definitely do that. All right. All right. Thank you so much for your time. Enjoy your day, OK?
SPEAKER2	01:11:39	You too. I'll talk to you soon. Bye.

Appendix P

Specific criteria for DLA awards

Award Title: [redacted] Distance Learning Award **Award Description: This award is given to an agency, institution, or company that has shown outstanding leadership in the field of distance learning. The award recognizes pioneering organizations in the field that have changed distance learning, challenged existing practice, or developed new and effective solutions.**				
Criteria	**Strong (5)**	**Medium (3)**	**Weak (1)**	**Sample Evidences**
Leadership (40%)	Organization is a strong leader and pioneer in distance education. The organization provides extra value to the industry, such as providing resources, training, mentoring. The organization is a step ahead of others, forging new paths and helping others to follow. The organization sets the example for others.	The organization occasionally provides resources, training and mentoring to others, and helps others in the industry.	The organization does not provide resources, training and mentoring to others, or help others in the industry.	Evidences of programs where the organization has lead out in providing resources, training and mentoring to others, setting an example and helping others to follow.
Vision (10%)	Organization management team has a long-term vision for future growth and leadership in the field of distance	Organization management team has a short-term vision for growth and leadership in the field of distance learning.	Organization has goals for growth in the field of distance learning	Documentation outlining the vision for future growth and leadership of the organization.
	learning.			
Partnerships & Collaborations (20%)	Organization has external partnerships or collaborations that are a benefit to the organization and the partners.	The organization has limited external partnerships or collaborations that are a benefit to the organization and the partners.	The organization has few or no external partnerships or collaborations.	Evidences of external partnerships or collaborations that are a benefit to the organization and the partners.
Evaluation (20%)	Organization has a strong evaluation process to monitor the effectiveness of its distance learning programs. Strong statistical data attests to the success of the organization.	The organization has an evaluation process to monitor the effectiveness of its distance learning programs. There is some statistical data attesting to the success of the organization.	The organization does little to monitor the effectiveness of its distance learning programs. There is insufficient statistical data attesting to the success of the organization.	Statistical data attesting to the success of the organization.
Solid Operations (10%)	Organization has a strong business plan demonstrating sound fiscal management, effective marketing and promotion of products and services, and an expanding base of clients.	The organization has a business plan demonstrating fiscal management, marketing and promotion of products and services.	The organization has a weak business plan that does not adequately demonstrate fiscal management, marketing and promotion of products and services.	Business plan documentation outlining fiscal management, marketing and promotion of products and services, and expanding client base.

Appendix Q

Specific criteria for DLC awards

Pillars of Quality How well does this submission impact:	**Pillar Definition**	**Evidence** Submission includes evidence of excellence for this pillar.
Learning Effectiveness	Learning effectiveness is concerned with ensuring that online students are provided with a high-quality education. Instructors and course developers should take advantage of the unique characteristics of online environments to provide learning experiences that represent the distinctive quality of the institution offering them.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:
Scale	Scale is the principle that enables institutions to offer their best educational value to learners and to achieve capacity enrollment. Institutional commitment to quality and finite resources requires continuous improvement policies for developing and assessment of cost-effectiveness measures and practices. The goal is to control costs so that tuition is affordable yet sufficient to meet development and maintenance costs — and to provide a return on investment in startup and infrastructure.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:
Access	Access provides the means for all qualified, motivated students to complete courses, degrees, or programs in their disciplines of choice. The goal is to provide meaningful and effective access throughout the entire student's life cycle. Access starts with enabling prospective learners to become aware of available opportunities through effective marketing, branding, and basic program information. It continues with providing program access (for example, quantity and variety of available program options, clear program information), seamless access to courses (for example, readiness assessment, intuitive navigability), and appropriate learning resources.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:
Faculty Satisfaction	Faculty Satisfaction reflects instructors finding the online, blended, or digital teaching experience to be personally rewarding and professionally beneficial. Faculty satisfaction is enhanced when the institution supports faculty members with a robust and well-maintained technical infrastructure, training in online instructional skills, and ongoing technical and administrative assistance, building instructor autonomy and agency in supporting the success of their students.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:
Student Satisfaction	Student Satisfaction reflects the effectiveness of all aspects of the educational experience. The goal is that all students who engage in digital learning experiences express satisfaction with course rigor and impact with professor and peer interaction, and with support services. Students put a primary value on appropriate, constructive, and substantive interaction with faculty and other students. Educators assist students in achieving learning outcomes that match course and learner objectives by using current information and communications technologies to support active, individualized, engaged, and constructive learning.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion reflects the impact of the strategies, initiatives, and support that ensure access to a quality online, blended, and digital learning experience for all learners. Through research, practice, continuous improvement, and organizational leadership, this area of excellence focuses on the advancement of equitable and inclusive actions across internal organizations and external community actions.	4 – Strongly Agree 3 – Agree 2 – Disagree 1 – Strongly Disagree or N/A Reviewer Comments:

Appendix R

Best Practices of Exceptional College Professors: Relevance in Online Distance Learning

Best practices organized by topic and related to the six assumptions of Adult Learning Theory:
A1: Need to Know
A2: Learner Self Concept
A3: Experience
A4: Readiness to Learn
A5: Problem-solving Orientation
A6: Motivation

			A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
Course Design: Reduce Cognitive Load								
	1.	Keep students within the LMS, infrequent links to external materials or apps	X	X		X		X
	2.	High level of organization using weekly modules	X	X		X		X
	3.	Consistency in visual design across weekly modules to reduce cognitive load and confirm students are in the same course all semester	X	X		X		X
	4.	Provide a course tour at the beginning of the semester	X	X		X		X
	5.	Focus a screenshot of the course schedule that is focused on the appropriate week and use this image as the banner on the top of each weekly module	X	X		X		X
	6.	Align all course content and assignments to objectives	X	X		X		X
	7.	Keep lectures short and focused	X	X		X		X
Communication: Consistent, Personal, Encouraging								
	1.	Consistent patterns of communication: beginning of week and midweek	X			X		X
	2.	Use announcements to draw attention to items, to breaking news that is relatable		X	X			
	3.	Use repetition to ensure that the message is received	X	X		X		X
	4.	Use direct to student text messaging through school software instead of email		X	X			

	5.	Email students individually, not as a group		X	X			
	6.	Email students via a school administrative email to increase gravity of message when appropriate		X	X			
	7.	Use student first names in communications to personalize		X	X			
	8.	Use AI in the LMS to remind students about pending due dates	X	X	X			X
	9.	Contact students who fail to turn in an assignment within 24 hours of the due date to remind the students that they can still earn points and to encourage them to submit the assignment		X				X
	10.	Are visible in video recordings	X		X			X
	11.	Share short video updates that are not highly produced, but intentionally casual	X		X			X
	12.	State clearly at the beginning of the semester that there is no busy work in the course and that everything will be useful.	X		X	X	X	
	13.	Specify focused readings: “Read pages 11-29, 32-44, 49-60” not “read chapter 2.”	X			X		X
	14.	Conduct weekly office hours that are “branded” under a name that relates to student career aspirations and sounds engaging.	X	X		X		X
	15.	Consistently explain to students how the course content will be useful in the students’ future career			X		X	X
Assignments: Useful, Practical Applications								
	1.	Do not assign busy work.		X	X	X	X	
	2.	Allow students to personalize/modify assignments based on where they are and what will be most useful and meaningful to them	X	X	X		X	X
	3.	Sequence assignments so that the larger point-value assignments are not due the final two weeks of the course. This gives students who do not score well on high point-value assignments opportunities to recover.	X			X		X
	4.	Use formative assessment over high stakes exams and papers	X			X		X

	5.	Include a statement at the top of each assignment that explains why the assignment is relevant to the student based on their career aspirations			X		X	
	6.	Attach points to attending the branded office hours. Conduct 1:1 sessions for students who have a scheduling conflict or provide a recording they can watch.	X			X		X
	7.	Create assignments that will challenge students			X		X	
	8.	Create assignments where the students have to compare and contrast			X		X	
	9.	Create assignments where students have to project themselves into their future careers			X		X	X
Discussion Boards: Drive Content Association and Participation								
	1.	Do not use or enforce a word limit	X			X		X
	2.	Use as a formative assessment worth only a few points each week	X			X		X
	3.	Structure points so that the maximum points earned occur when the student participates in the discussion board three times on three separate days in a week.				X		X
	4.	Require the student to relate the course material specifically to their lives and experiences			X		X	
	5.	Professor participates in the discussion board		X				X
	6.	Structure the discussion board to be one single threaded journal that each student writes in weekly. Students then use this journal to inform a final reflection paper.		X			X	
Grading and Feedback: Promotes Learning and Improvement								
	1.	Accept late assignments with minimal point deduction		X	X			X
	2.	Grade assignments quickly		X				X
	3.	Include specific feedback that includes instructions on what to change to earn a higher score		X				X

	4.	Include links to resources to help the student perform better on the next assignment or to help the student locate correct answers	X	X			X	X
	5.	Contact students who do not submit an assignment within 24 hours of the due date reminding them they can still earn points and encouraging them to submit the assignment		X	X			X

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