

COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR'S EXPERIENCES IN DESIGNING ONLINE COURSES FOR  
STUDENT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: A TRANSCENDENTAL  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

by

Sherry Birdwell

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online courses to facilitate learning opportunities for students at Gotham University (a pseudonym). This study was guided by the E-learning theory developed by Mayer et al. (2016), which introduced the importance of understanding how to create learning environments that are engaging and motivating. The E-learning theory was used to answer the following central research question: What is the experience of college instructors in designing online college courses? The central research question allowed the participants to describe their experiences designing online courses that offer student engagement, motivation, and promote student learning. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants for the study. The data collection methods used in the study were interviews with each participant, an analysis of course documents, and observations of the courses. A total of 12 participants took part in the research study and provided a better understanding of the phenomenon. Data analysis followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological research approach to help provide better insight into the experiences college instructors face when creating online courses. Three themes and eight sub-themes emerged from the study. The themes were instructional design, socialization, and effectiveness of online learning. All findings associated with this study could benefit higher education institutions, current and future instructors, and current and future students.

*Keywords:* online learning, technology, course design, learning management system

## **Copyright Page**

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## **Dedication**

First, I must thank the Lord for providing me with the strength necessary to pursue the doctoral degree. Through lots of prayers, I felt encouraged to continue my educational journey with your presence nearby.

Secondly, I wish to thank my family for all their support throughout my journey. My husband, Lee, has been one of my biggest supporters and has helped me to restore faith in my abilities. If I ever mentioned giving up, you would tell me how proud you were of me. The positive affirmations you provided helped me overcome many obstacles and kept me on track in the program. I love you!

Braeden, my son, you have also kept me encouraged to keep pushing towards my educational goals and dreams. Whenever I had hard times throughout the program, you would not hesitate to tell me that I was smart and more than capable of finishing. Your faith in me is what has kept me working towards my goals, you are the best son a mother could ever ask for. I love you more!

My parents are another huge influence in my decision to pursue a doctorate. Growing up, my parents always told my sisters and me that we could achieve anything we set our minds to. Mom, I cannot express how much your support has meant to me, not only during this journey but throughout my life. Your unwavering love has challenged me to do the best that I can, and I will forever be grateful. I love you! Dad, you were also such a huge supporter of any choice that I made growing up and into adulthood. I would give anything to have you here with me to witness my growth during this journey. I know you would be so proud of me and would be bragging to anyone who would listen. I love you and miss you more than you could ever imagine.

Lastly, I want to thank my sisters, Donna, and Sandra, for always listening to me vent when I felt that I was in over my head. Thank each of you for supporting me on my journey and telling me that I could be successful if I continued to work hard in my studies. Your unconditional love for me is felt and returned, I love you both so very much and am blessed to call you, my sisters.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

American Disabilities Act (ADA)

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Open Educational Resources (OER)

Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)

Quality Matters (QM)

World Wide Web (WWW)



## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

In an ever-evolving technological world, many colleges and universities have started offering online courses and programs (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). Online learning has entered the mainstream in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and has continued to experience a growth at an accelerated rate with each passing year (Sun & Chen, 2016). With its growing popularity, it is important to ensure online learning effectively promotes student learning while keeping students engaged in the coursework. Online learning offers many advantages that face-to-face learning does not have, but all conveniences are lost if students cannot receive the same educational standards in both learning formats (Mayer, 2017). Despite the chosen learning environment, all courses must be created to facilitate student learning (Logofatu, 2018). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide an understanding of the experience's college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities. This study provided better insight into online learning and recognized gaps or problems that could cause detrimental effects if not dealt with swiftly and appropriately. Each section in the study provided vital information to help current and future educators determine the correct way to promote learning in online environments. By creating online learning environments that are student-centered, technology-driven, and engaging, the students are certain to flourish and succeed. The first chapter incorporates historical, theoretical, and social contexts and will explain the researcher's passion for conducting the study. This chapter begins with a detailed description of the historical context surrounding online learning in higher education. Designed to provide insight into the phenomenon, chapter one has the following categories: background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and definitions.

## **Background**

Online learning has become increasingly popular throughout the past few decades (Sun & Chen, 2016). Shifting to predominantly virtual environments, higher education continues to undergo substantial social changes in the classrooms and organizations (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). There are many benefits to online learning, such as telecommuting, flexible hours, less costly, and learning despite situations like global pandemics. Students have utilized online learning in higher education for many years due to convenience and the ability to fit courses around busy schedules, stay up-to-date with the latest technologies, and the appeal of working independently (Bowen et al., 2013). Unfortunately, there are many instances where online courses are designed by individuals who have not had proper training and lack the skills necessary to design effective courses (Logofatu, 2018). During the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, it became more apparent that some colleges and universities were not equipped to turn fully virtual, and there were many negative experiences had by instructors and students alike. Many students and instructors experience stress and anxiety when moving to an online learning environment; without proper construction, online learning environments can cause confusion (Xie & Rice, 2021).

## **Historical Context**

With many technological advances throughout the past centuries, distance learning opportunities began to develop and flourish. The innovation of technology to promote and enhance learning environments was astonishing (Herrington et al., 2007). Distance learning achieved academic recognition in 1892 when the University of Chicago created the first college-level distance learning program. This distance learning was first achieved through the postal service; students would receive their assignments in the mail (Casey, 2008). In the mid-1900s,

distance learning began to appear in many schools, colleges, and universities (Casey, 2008). The shift from the postal service to televisions had occurred, helping reach a broader group of students. Finally, around 1999, the U.S. Department of Education established a distance learning program (Casey, 2008). Since the establishment of distance learning programs, many colleges and universities have begun offering fully accredited programs to expand their services to students around the world (Bowen et al., 2013).

After the establishment of online learning in 1999, the popularity of online learning has continued to grow and expand on many levels (Casey, 2008). By the 2000s, the increase of working adults and college-age students was heavily relying on online learning to acquire college degrees (Castano-munoz et al., 2016). Online learning could take place at any time and any location, making it an important part of the education world (Mayer, 2017). With more colleges and universities offering larger varieties of online courses and fully online programs, students have been able to choose if they wish to attend face-to-face courses or join the world of virtual learning (Mayer, 2017). There are some concerns surrounding online learning; many people wonder if online courses offer the same educational standards and learning opportunities as experienced in face-to-face environments (Soffer, 2018). Online learning environments should offer the same high-leverage learning strategy that can meet the educational values of every student (Dillon, 2018). For online courses to be deemed effective, each must include a blend of appropriate learning theories, technological elements, and the tools necessary to run efficiently (Soffer, 2018).

### **Social Context**

The use of technology in education allowed the opportunity for students to attend online college courses that offer flexibility and the ability to facilitate student learning (Panigrahi et al.,

2018). However, online learning environments must facilitate student learning opportunities and be designed effectively (Logofatu, 2018). Despite the popularity of online learning, concerns still arise regarding the effectiveness of online learning when the courses are designed by individuals who are inexperienced in online course creation (Lewis, 2021).

Creating an online learning environment takes a lot of work and time to develop in order to produce a quality course (Hultberg et al., 2018). Effective online courses include a blend of learning theories, technologies, and pertinent course materials (Baldwin et al., 2018). Students enrolled in online courses designed to promote learning will flourish and better meet all course expectations (Hultberg et al., 2018). Students must be part of a learning environment that offers engagement, social opportunities, and motivation (Hultberg et al., 2018). The literature reviewed indicated that a well-designed online course could enhance students' cognitive and social engagement (Lewis, 2021). Students enrolled in online college courses seek learning opportunities to be independent learners while remaining motivated to achieve all educational goals (Hong et al., 2021). Additionally, instructors seek innovative ways to help students become more independent, promote critical thinking, enhance problem-solving skills, and develop new knowledge. When the instructors learn how to create effective online courses that assist students in being successful, the colleges and/or universities will benefit from instructors and students who are better motivated and engaged within the courses (Lewis, 2021).

### **Theoretical Context**

The purpose of a learning theory is to provide better insight into human performance by showcasing instructional techniques, strategies, and tactics utilized by course instructors (Banihashem & Aliabadi, 2017). Learning theories encompass specific principles to explain changes in human performance, provide guidelines for instructional elements, and lay the

foundation for knowing when and how to integrate the chosen elements (Baruque & Melo, 2004). The theory that guided this research was the e-learning theory developed by Mayer, Sweller, and Moreno. The e-learning theory focuses on the use of multimedia for student learning purposes in online environments (Clark & Mayer, 2016). Composed of 11 instructional design principles, the e-learning theory demonstrates how educational technology is a great way to promote effective learning among students (Clark & Mayer, 2016; Mayer et al., 2015).

After reviewing the literature, many common themes were present that were focused on the importance of effective online course creation/design in higher education. Online courses allow students to learn at their own pace and be more independent (Lewis, 2021). However, if the online courses are not constructed to facilitate student learning, the students will suffer. Universities and colleges continue to see the benefit of online learning that promotes growth and knowledge in students. When designing online courses, engaging activities must allow students to be motivated to learn (Karpov & Haywood, 1998). Driven by engaging activities in online learning, the e-learning theory promotes presentations, videos, games, and interactive simulations to ensure students are motivated and engaged in the course content (Mayer, 2021). The e-learning theory relies on multimedia in online learning environments; it highlights the main ways in which online courses should be developed. Having a better understanding of creating effective online learning environments will benefit educators and students alike (Karpov & Haywood, 1998).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that many college/university instructors are required to design online courses with very little to no knowledge of how to create effective online learning environments to promote student learning. Online learning has the ability to offer students a wide variety of

educational opportunities that were not possible a few decades ago (Bowen et al., 2013). Course instructors must be able to design and deliver content to meet the educational needs of all learners (Franklin, 2017). With many colleges and universities turning to online learning to reach more students, it is crucial to ensure its effectiveness (Mayer, 2017). Online learning has the potential to facilitate student learning and suit the needs of each student if any design issues are addressed swiftly and appropriately (Gay, 2016). Therefore, it is vital to allow instructors to share all experiences, good or bad, in designing and creating online learning environments.

More recently, the world was faced with a global pandemic, COVID-19, which forced all colleges and universities to shut down and move to online learning for a while as it was found to be unsafe to attend live classes (Okasha, 2020). In doing so, it was evident that many faculty members and students were not prepared to move to online learning. The rush to move courses online proved difficult, and many instructors had no knowledge of how to design effective online learning environments (Okasha, 2020). With more and more students turning to online learning, it is important that colleges and universities can provide each with environments that help them acquire new knowledge, retain pertinent information, and promote better passing rates (Xie & Rice, 2021).

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online courses to facilitate learning opportunities for students at Gotham University (a pseudonym). At this stage in the research, online learning is generally defined as learning that takes place with the use of technology and can be utilized from any location (Singh & Thurman, 2019). The theory guiding this study was the e-learning theory which focuses on helping educators learn how to create online learning environments that

promote engagement and motivation in hopes of helping the students meet their educational goals. (Mayer, et al., 2015). It has become more critical than ever for higher learning institutions to incorporate the accelerated growth of technology into education and create a balance of motivation, engagement, and socialization in online learning that is certain to facilitate student learning (Kahlil & Elkhider, 2016).

### **Significance of the Study**

Along with the theoretical relationship of this study, the main significance of the study was to understand the perceptions and hardships of online course design as described by the instructors who have experience with this phenomenon. Understanding the perceptions and hardships of course design will help provide a deeper understanding of whether instructors feel that online course design requires more training and support from administration to ensure the courses will facilitate student learning. One way to ensure online learning is effective is by carefully and skillfully planning out the design of the courses/programs by adding the appropriate technologies, methods, theories, and course content. Typically, instructors are subject matter experts who have to tackle jobs meant for instructional designers despite not having the necessary training (Baldwin, 2019). The online course design thinking process requires different approaches and a variety of methodologies. Online courses should be human-centered, engaging, collaborative, interactive, and focused on learning through a blend of pertinent materials and technologies (Brown & Green, 2018).

### **Empirical Significance**

The data retrieved from this study provided empirical evidence by supporting the beliefs and experiences that each participant described. The results stemming from this study are crucial for college administrators, instructors, and students because they will describe challenges faced

by instructors who have to create online courses without instructional design experience. Past research surrounding online learning failed to investigate further the correlation between online course design and the lack of design experience faced by instructors who are designing the courses (Chen & Carliner, 2021). In 2018, a study was completed by Chen and Carliner, who found that students suffered academically when placed in a learning environment that was not stimulating. It was determined that exploration into instructor-built online courses should be completed to discover where an issue might reside (Chen & Carliner, 2021). Many higher education institutions feel that online course design should be listed in the duties of the course instructor despite the risk of a lack of design training (Hultberg et al., 2018). Unfamiliarity with online pedagogies and the extensive emerging technologies are areas that hinder instructors when designing online courses (Chen & Carliner, 2021). Instructional designers are vital in online course design to ensure that the appropriate technologies, learning materials, and all other pertinent elements are present within a course (Brigance, 2011). If colleges and universities continue to have course instructors design online courses, instructional designers should be readily available to offer support and guidance throughout the design process (Lewis, 2021).

### **Practical Significance**

For this study, the practical significance was to record, analyze, and validate the experiences stated by the course instructors who design and create online courses. The data received from the study could justify changes in how the course instructors set up online learning environments. With online learning continuing to grow, it is important to understand why some students feel unmotivated in online courses and if there is a correlation between instructor-designed courses and student satisfaction that leads to poor grades and lower retention rates (Silva et al., 2021). Inexperienced course designers often produce courses lacking the ability to



provide motivating and engaging learning opportunities for students (Lewis, 2021). When instructors work closely with course designers, the online courses created can help each student reach their full potential (Brigance, 2011). A study surrounding instructor-designed online courses could benefit many colleges and universities by providing an understanding centered on the need to employ instructional designers or offer instructors proper training on online course design (Chen & Carliner, 2021).

### **Theoretical Significance**

The theoretical significance of this study was guided by the e-learning theory developed by Mayer, Sweller, and Moreno. The e-learning theory promotes the idea that educators must facilitate student learning centered around a particular subject by structuring assignments to allow students the right to utilize their capabilities in knowledge formation (Moreno & Mayer, 2007). Utilizing the e-learning theory in online course design will allow instructors to create an environment that provides student engagement and facilitates student learning (Moreno & Mayer, 2007). To encourage students to be engaged and motivated in online courses, each course requires socialization and collaborative aspects that allow interactions between peers (Mayer, 2017). Online courses designed using the e-learning theory will create learning environments where students are able to learn from and with one another, be engaged in the materials, and be successful (Mayer, 2017).

### **Research Questions**

The interrogative process used to develop qualitative research questions will help shape the study and keep the research headed in the correct direction (Agee, 2009). To understand the challenges of online course design, each research question provided better insight into the study. All posed questions provided a deeper understanding of how instructors design online courses to

promote student learning opportunities. Guiding this research was one central research question and three sub-questions.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of college instructors in designing online college courses?

### **Sub-Question One**

What types of challenges are faced when instructors are required to design online courses in higher education?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How can course instructors lacking experience feel more supported in designing online courses/programs to create effective learning environments?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How does course design impact socialization and collaboration among peers and cause lower retention rates among students who are dissatisfied with online learning experiences?

## **Definitions**

Below are the definitions of terms pertinent to the study that was conducted.

Included in the definitions are any terms that use abbreviations as applicable.

1. *Online Learning* – Composed of both asynchronous and synchronous learning, students have the flexibility to work on discussion prompts, assignments, and all other course instructional elements independently as long as they are meeting deadlines. (Panigrahi et al., 2018).
2. *Instructional Design* – The creation of a plan that is put in place to develop an object, element, or system (Brown & Green, 2018).

3. *Face-to-Face Learning* – An educational method in which an instructor teaches students course content in the same room as many of their peers (Francis et al., 2019).
4. *Higher Education* – is post-secondary education conducted at colleges and universities around the world (Voronov et al., 2018).
5. *COVID-19* – caused by a coronavirus, SARS-COV-2, is a highly contagious respiratory disease (Tanno et al., 2020).

### **Summary**

Chapter one provided an overview of the topic, the problem based on the study, the significance, and all pertinent research questions that assisted in developing the research. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online courses to facilitate learning opportunities for students at Gotham University (a pseudonym). With rapid advances in technology, colleges and universities have felt the need to add online courses and programs to their academic program choices (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). More recent popularity of online learning was due partially to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. However, many colleges and universities were unprepared for online course development, which created chaos for students and teachers alike (Garcia-Morales et al., 2021). Higher learning institutions need to be certain they are offering their instructors support when teaching online, the appropriate training necessary for creating effective online learning environments, and the tools to ensure the courses and programs are able to provide student motivation, retention, and success (Skelcher et al., 2019). Many larger colleges and universities choose to employ instructional designers to create online courses and programs; designers know to develop content on a multimodal level that will benefit all students enrolled (Skelcher et al., 2019). Unfortunately, many colleges and universities are still relying on

instructors to design and create their online courses, which can prove detrimental to developing effective online courses (Silva et al., 2021). This research study is significant to current college and university instructors, future instructors, and administrative staff members who need a deeper understanding of online course design and the challenges faced as described by the participants. This study also addressed a gap in the literature as there has been little to no research describing the instructor's perceptions of designing online courses to facilitate student learning opportunities. The qualitative research study was conducted at two local universities located in Northeast Texas, with the participants being instructors who have created online courses despite having no formal training.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

The purpose of conducting this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of college instructors who design online courses for student learning opportunities in higher education. The effectiveness of online learning could suffer if the course instructors lack technological skills or do not have proper teaching strategies implemented (Baldwin, 2019). The research in this study was grounded in the E-learning theory developed by Mayer, Sweller, and Moreno. The e-learning theory is centered on ensuring that educators create online learning environments that can assist students in being successful while remaining (David, 2015). Current literature provided a clear understanding of well-designed online courses are created and their effectiveness in facilitating student learning. This chapter will include information about the theoretical framework related to the topic in this literature review. Additionally, this chapter will provide the benefits and challenges that accompany online learning from the perspectives of those who have firsthand experience. While prior research covering online learning has identified the need for instructor-student interaction and engaging course materials, little has been discussed on how instructor-designed online courses play a role in facilitating student learning. Online instructors must possess technological skills, build rapport with the students, and develop teaching strategies to facilitate student learning. This chapter concludes by examining what makes online courses effective in higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As stated by Corbett and Spinello (2020), “when applied to how people learn, theories of learning account for how the learning process takes place and provide guidelines for action to improve successful learning” (p. 2). The guiding theory for this study was the e-learning theory

developed by Mayer, Sweller, and Moreno. Built on cognitive science principles, the e-learning theory describes how students learn and retain knowledge while reducing extraneous loads and managing intrinsic loads for students relying on technology for learning purposes (David, 2016). The e-learning theory was developed for educators to learn how to advance the individualized learning of students, and this theory has been embraced by educators when creating effective online learning environments designed to keep students engaged (David, 2016). For education to develop and learners to see connections between ideas and concepts, educators must nurture and maintain connections that can facilitate continuous learning (Dreamson, 2020). By applying the e-learning theory to this study, instructors can learn how to design online college courses to provide engagement and motivations that will assist in students acquiring new knowledge. The e-learning theory in this study will bring a stronger understanding of the importance of providing a comprehensive pathway for students by creating online courses that help each student meet course objectives (Low & Sweller, 2005; Clark & Mayer, 2016).

Mayer, Sweller, and Moreno based the e-learning theory on 11 design principles: multimedia, modality, coherence, contiguity, segmenting, signaling, learner control, personalization, pre-training, redundancy, and expertise effect (Egbert & Roe, 2019). When developing the e-learning theory, the researchers determined principles to be necessary due to its emphasis on integrating technologies to promote student learning (Egbert & Roe, 2019). Perhaps one of the most critical principles of the theory is the multimedia principle which is centered on the combination of text, visuals, and audio to promote a richer learning experience (David, 2016; Fletcher & Tobias, 2012). Well-designed online learning environments incorporate ways to reach multiple learning styles using various technologies, tools, and instructional materials. Focusing

on the multimedia principle in the e-learning theory, online courses have the potential to assist students with meeting their educational goals (Dawson et al., 2021; Fletcher & Tobias, 2012).

In addition to the multimedia principle of the e-learning theory, the coherence principle is vital within an online course. Often, online courses can seem a bit overloaded when instructors add too many technologies and instructional materials. The coherence principle is about finding a healthy balance of technological content to prevent a cognitive overload of unrelated content (Mayer, 2021). Students are all working on different learning levels, which can be difficult when attending a college course that simply adds many forms of content without determining if the students have prior knowledge and understanding of the subject matter (Pape & Prosser, 2018). An online course should incorporate technology, but there needs to be a limit set that will allow the courses to be designed to avoid having unrelated course content to reduce the cognitive load of the students (Mayer, 2021).

Another e-learning theory principle that will assist in effective online course design is the segmenting principle. Once again, when courses are packed full of content, cognitive overload can occur, which will cause students to lose their motivation. The segmenting principle divides the course content into much smaller chunks of information which will cause students to retain information and achieve deeper thinking (David, 2015; Egbert & Roe, 2019). In an online course, the students are deemed more independent than those attending face-to-face classes. The reduction and segmentation of instructional content are necessary to keep students focused and have ample time to study (Chen & Yen, 2021). The e-learning theory and all its design principles will help offer support as the experiences of each instructor are examined during the research. All principles within the e-learning theory work together to help instructors learn how to create

online courses that will allow all students to reach their full potential without experiencing cognitive overload (Mayer, 2021).

### **Related Literature**

Online learning is not a new phenomenon in higher education, but higher education institutions have accelerated growth in online academic courses (Soffer & Nachmias, 2018). Throughout the past few decades, online learning has continued to grow in popularity in colleges and universities around the world. In this ever-evolving technological world, higher education institutions are always searching for ways to deliver and enhance online learning opportunities for students (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Online learning should help students develop the ability to retain information, experience growth in knowledge, stay motivated, and increase overall academic performances (Goradia, 2019). To help facilitate student learning opportunities, online courses are developed using modern technologies for enhancement purposes. The use of technologies in online learning environments allows students to develop better visual and verbal representations of the content being addressed within the course (Thai et al., 2019).

Larger universities and colleges employ a few instructional designers to oversee online course build, ensuring each course is developed following specific guidelines and will facilitate student learning (Saunders et al., 2020). The instructional designers have years of prior schooling and the necessary training to build online courses that can assist students in being successful (Saunders et al., 2020). Instructional designers train on ways to improve online learning with the addition of technologies, open educational resources (OER), and other elements that help shape online courses. However, numerous universities and colleges still rely on the course instructors to build online courses despite their lack of knowledge, which can cause the courses to be insufficient in facilitating student learning (Baldwin, 2019).



## **History of Online Learning**

The origin of online learning, also known as e-learning, dates to the mid-1800s (Lee, 2017). In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, distance learning was made possible with the use of the U.S. Postal Service and the ability to provide long-distance correspondence (Lee, 2017). Online learning became popular quickly by offering the ability to provide flexible access to instruction at any time, from any place (Castro & Tumibay, 2021). As a promise to provide students with educational opportunities when unable to attend face-to-face courses, online learning has become an excellent way for students to work towards achieving goals and obtaining diplomas (Lee, 2017). Additionally, this type of learning was wonderful for nonresident students and non-traditional adult students who otherwise would not have the opportunity to pursue higher education (Kentnor, 2015).

As technology advancements were made, online learning became mainstream, thus changing higher education significantly (Scigliano, 2000). Online learning uses technology to create a bridge between teaching and education to facilitate learning. In online learning, students must take accountability for their learning process, educational goals, and effective time management skills (Roberts, 2019). It is apparent that online learning has changed drastically from the time it first began, and it will continue to grow and improve throughout the years to come (Lee, 2017).

## **Online Learning in Today's Times**

Online learning is still the fastest-growing form of education in colleges and universities across the globe; it has impacted higher education and has changed the entire landscape of education (Kentnor, 2015). Two of the most popular reasons students choose online learning are flexibility and accessibility. Students attending online courses/programs can log in to the courses

from anywhere in the world as there is no commute taking place; this is great for those who might have to travel with their jobs (Mayadas et al., 2009; Tseng et al., 2020). Additionally, online learning is great when face-to-face classes cannot be conducted, such as during weather-related closures and the more recent closures due to COVID-19.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a great deal of panic prompted school closures for safety measures (Moawad, 2020). Therefore, online learning was utilized more than ever, but some educators and students were not ready for the change, especially so abruptly (Moawad, 2020). Thankfully, the advancements in technologies throughout the past decades have played an important role in education when shifting from face-to-face classes to fully online (Thom et al., 2021). However, that shift from face-to-face to online learning proved very challenging for many educators and students alike; the educational world was not prepared for such a drastic change to occur as quickly as possible (Thom et al., 2021).

### **Online Learning During COVID-19**

In late 2019, a public health crisis was created by the Novel Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) development, which initially began as an outbreak that was isolated in the Wuhan Province of China (Mukhtar et al., 2020; Penrod et al., 2022). By the spring of 2020, the rest of the world was faced with the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit dramatically and rapidly, causing closures for colleges, universities, and school districts around the world (Hussein et al., 2020; Maqableh & Alia, 2021). Unfortunately, many people were not ready for the educational world to be entirely online. Educators worldwide struggled to create courses quickly, and students had to prepare themselves by securing computers to use. Parents had to adjust work schedules to accommodate their child(ren)'s online schooling, and no one was truly ready for the change (Maqableh & Alia, 2021).

Upon the start of the pandemic, many colleges and universities reported a decline in enrollments because students were unsure how well the courses would run when moved online, and others were simply not prepared to attend college in an online format (Penrod et al., 2022). Not all students and instructors/educators are technologically savvy, which caused an issue for many who were trying to figure out how to navigate throughout the course. Accessing materials within the LMS proved to be a difficult task (Mukhtar et al., 2020; Penrod et al., 2022). Although instructors/educators tried their hardest to push through and help guide the students, it was a challenging task since the help was also completed virtually (Cranfield et al., 2021; Nagai, 2021). All the challenges impacted some students and educators more than others; courses were being altered to fit into an online learning environment, some instructional materials had to be changed to become accessible for the students, some faced internet access issues, and others had no appropriate study spaces to conduct/attend online courses (Cranfield et al., 2021; Nagai, 2021).

Despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, educators and students alike remained hopeful and worked hard to make the most out of a bad situation. Although the spring 2020 semester was not ideal for anyone within the education system, the unity that shined through was truly inspirational (Penrod et al., 2022). Instructors and students alike were focused on making it through the 2020 school year with perseverance and dignity while relying on each other for support to continue forward (Penrod et al., 2022). During the trying times, people were trying their best to help one another, show compassion for those who were struggling, and remain focused on finishing the semester with dignity and grace (Cranfield et al., 2021). Luckily, with today's use and knowledge of online learning, students can continue the school year without the

risk of falling behind, and educators can stay connected to the students while finishing up the school year (Gui et al., 2021; Thom et al., 2021).

### **The Role of Online Instructors**

In online learning, instructors must be knowledgeable of the subject being taught and have the necessary skillset to facilitate student learning. Instructors need to provide guidance and assistance to students, create high-quality learning environments, stimulate motivation among students, and learn how to organize learning content with the integration of technologies for online delivery (Barrot et al., 2021; Ma et al., 2015). The instructors of online courses are a key component of whether a student will experience success or failure. It is necessary for online instructors to be technologically versatile, well-trained in integrating technology into the curriculum, and adapt their teaching strategies to meet the requirements of a successful online learning environment (Usher et al., 2021; Gay, 2016).

Online instructors must guide students through the learning activities and ensure the students are engaged in the learning materials (Arghode et al., 2018; Chang et al., 2014). Online instructors play a key role in making online learning a success. Therefore, online instructors must be certain they have all the necessary components and training to create learning environments rich in knowledge designed to promote student engagement, motivation, learning, retention, and satisfaction (Adnan, 2018; Gay, 2016). If the instructors are willing to put forth the effort to carefully plan out and design a course that incorporates all the components to produce cognition, the online learning environment will be efficient and effective in helping students build more knowledge of the topic being studied (Adnan, 2018; Gay, 2016).

The effectiveness of online learning relies heavily on the instructor's ability to create an effective learning environment. In online courses, it is important for students to have positive

student-instructor interactions present to help students feel at ease and as if they are not alone (Martin, 2020). With a sense of connectedness, students feel less isolated and tend to perform better. The presence of instructors in online learning environments is necessary for fostering student learning and helping increase student retention (Collins et al., 2019). To ensure students want to continue their studies in online learning environments, the instructors need to help increase student confidence, motivation, and support needed to feel safe in online learning (Nortvig et al., 2018). To be deemed effective, many students must be satisfied with online learning and enroll in additional online courses in future semesters (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). In addition to instructor presence within the online learning environment, instructors must possess technological skills to design an online course successfully (Adnan, 2018; Gay, 2016).

Designing online courses requires a lot of work and technological skills. The design work is completed using a learning management system (LMS). Effectively designing an online course requires instructional materials, supportive technologies, a blend of teaching strategies, and other pertinent elements for instructional purposes (Baldwin & Yu-Hui, 2019). The influx of technology could pose the greatest struggle in online course design if the instructors are unfamiliar with many pertinent technologies that facilitate learning (Scoppio & Luyt, 2017). The addition of new and emerging technologies remains an integral part of developing online courses and programs. If courses are designed effectively, students will improve their retention of new knowledge and critical thinking skills (Baldwin & Yu-Hui, 2019).

### **Learning Management Systems**

To create an online course or program successfully and effectively, the instructor or designer must utilize a learning management system (LMS) for development purposes. LMSs are frequently utilized in higher education institutions as online learning environments accessed by

students and faculty members alike (Koh & Kan, 2019). A learning management system, sometimes called a course management system, is a software system offering structure using a large variety of course tools designed to deliver, track, and manage learning content, progress, and interactions (Linder et al., 2017). There are many LMSs to choose from, such as Blackboard, Canvas, Desire2Learn (D2L), Moodle, and several others that assist in effective course design. Most colleges and universities already have memberships to a particular LMS, and instructors must use the chosen LMS utilized by the school. There are many tools and customizable elements to enhance the learning environment, and all require instructor training to learn how best to implement each (Rucker & Frass, 2017). Without proper training on the school's LMS, many online courses could risk being poorly designed (Rucker & Frass, 2017).

With the use of the LMS, the course designer/instructor can maintain the integrity of the course and ensure the success of each student enrolled in the course. Within the LMS, the instructors can align the learning objectives to the needs of the students in an individualized manner (Vovides et al., 2007). To assist with targeted objectives, the designer/instructor can build interactive activities, quizzes, assessments, and other assignments designed to promote learning (Vovides et al., 2007). Additionally, the LMS allows immediate feedback for most of the activities created within the course. This is a wonderful feature for the instructors to utilize to help the students learn from any mistakes present (Linder et al., 2017). Although there are many LMSs to choose from, all are similar, and each offers the ability to create amazing learning environments that will allow students to reach their full potential (Linder et al., 2017).

### **Planning Online Course Designs**

Planning the design of online courses requires various stages to be completed before the implementation of the course is ready for a semester (Rajamma & Sciandra, 2020). Many design

features need to be incorporated into a course, such as using appropriate instructional materials, assessment rubrics, the addition of technologies that correlate with the instructional materials, and all other pertinent elements that make a course effective (Jaggars & Xu, 2016). Often taking several months to complete, the planning of an online course can be considered the blueprint of how the students will be learning and what materials will be utilized (Rajamma & Sciandra, 2020). With strategic planning of the online course before the actual build, the success of the course is more likely to be achieved (Rajamma & Sciandra, 2020).

Planning out the design of an online course is no easy feat; it requires the designer to follow specific guidelines to create an environment that will facilitate student learning. The success and quality of an online course are dependent on the advanced planning that is put forth at the start of the build; planning will assist the course designer in ensuring that all design elements are utilized within the course (Rajamma & Sciandra, 2020). In well-designed courses, the planning and preparation of the course design are deemed fundamental to achieving optimal learning experiences for students and instructors alike (Bennett et al., 2017). Planning all intricate details, content, materials, and assessments for the course is necessary to complete before moving to the design step of the course; it will help to reassure all parties involved in the course build can focus on designing an optimal learning environment since everything is laid out appropriately (Bennett et al., 2017).

### **Designing Online Courses**

Course design creates a way to structure specific and vital course content to maximize student acquisition of information and help each build important educational skills (Reiser & Dempsey, 2018). Using the institution's chosen LMS, online course design can take shape when the instructor or course designer adds the course components. Several elements are required to be

added to an online course, and each one plays an important role (Reiser & Dempsey, 2018). Each course must include a variety of assignments, goals and outcomes, pertinent course learning materials, and appropriate technologies (Backenroth & Katz, 2017; Larson & Lockee, 2014). To develop a fully functioning and effective online course, the person designing the course must put forth hard work and create an environment worthy of the students who will be in attendance (Rucker & Frass, 2017). The designers should aim to use various delivery methods and technologies to ensure all learning styles are met as all students learn in unique ways (Bozarth et al., 2004; Salmon et al., 2017).

One newer method of planning the development of online college courses is the backward design. Using the backward design to plan the course build, the designer begins with the establishment of goals, then creates the formative and summative assessments that are carefully aligned and planned out, followed by the creation of learning activities, and the process is completed with the creation of the lesson plans (Davis et al., 2021). The course designer will begin the course design with the pedagogical goals and proceed to work “backward” to determine which assessments need to be included to measure the goal outcomes (Cooper et al., 2017). Essentially, the backward design can be viewed as a “road map” of what the finished course will look like when complete (Cooper et al., 2017). With the backward design process being learning-centered, this method is favorable when developing online courses because the outcomes are prioritized (Davis et al., 2021). In opposition to the backward design framework, many designers utilize the ADDIE design framework to create a learning environment that can help the students meet their educational goals (Stefaniak & Xu, 2020). The ADDIE model has become a favorite design framework for many designers when creating online learning environments (Stefaniak & Xu, 2020).



## **Using the ADDIE Model in Online Course Design**

One of the most utilized frameworks in course design is the ADDIE method. The acronym for Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation, the ADDIE model is considered the most common framework model used to create online instructional materials (Stefaniak & Xu, 2020). Each phase in the ADDIE model is important to ensure the course designer produces a quality learning environment (Dong, 2021). Additionally, it is important to follow the model in the order intended; this will allow the designer to ensure the build is completed properly and without errors (Dong, 2021).

### ***Analysis***

At the beginning of any course build, it is important for designers to complete an analysis of the intended course design. The analysis phase will involve a great deal of “detective” work, research, and the gathering of information needed to move to the design phase of the model (Reinbold, 2013). The analysis phase will help ensure that any design challenges are dealt with at the start to avoid issues in the other phases of the build. The analysis step will assist the designer in analyzing the desired performance, outcomes, and project goals, and catch any performance gaps within the course (Dong, 2021). After the analysis phase is completed, the design phase begins, including an outline of the strategies, assessments, and learning activities (Trust & Pektas, 2018). Although all the phases are just as important as the next, the design phase is where the course will begin to take its shape (Soto, 2013).

### ***Design***

The design phase will have a particular sequence followed to produce cohesiveness within the course, and this will help ensure the course is aligned with all the other phases in the ADDIE model (Dong, 2021). The design phase will begin with using the information gathered

during the analysis phase of the model and end with essentially a blueprint of what the course will look like once it is finished (Reinbold, 2013). During the design phase, the assessment instruments, content, lessons, and learning objectives will be selected (Trust & Pektas, 2018). The learning objectives and course outcomes created during this phase are measurable and observable, which the instructors will use to see student progress throughout the course (Reinbold, 2013). The course designer will utilize this step to create the storyboards and visual and technical prototypes and gain insight into the entire layout of the course and how it will function (Dong, 2021). The design stage should follow a logical, orderly method to attain the set of plans necessary for creating a learning environment that will enrich the lives of the students (Trust & Pektas, 2018).

### ***Development***

Next, the development phase of the ADDIE model consists of creating the content, creating assessments, and integrating technologies within the course (Dong, 2021). The development phase overlaps with the previous two phases by placing all the course materials into the proper sequence and structure as determined during the design phase of the model (Reinbold, 2013). In the development stage, the course is created in the LMS chosen by the college or university that instructors will utilize when teaching the course after the semester begins (Dong, 2021). During this important step, the course is revised according to any feedback that might have been provided by other stakeholders of the project, such as course administrators, instructors, and other pertinent personnel (Trust & Pektas, 2018). By completing any revisions during the development step, designers can be certain that the course will meet all expectations once it is in the final stages of the build which will help the designers meet all course design timelines (Dong, 2021).

### ***Implementation***

The implementation step of the ADDIE model involves training course facilitators, such as the course instructors, as well as the stakeholders who are invested in the design (Dong, 2021). During the training process, the facilitators should be shown all aspects of the course, how to operate all the technologies, how each section should appear, and all necessary aspects of the build (Trust & Pektas, 2018). All design choices, learning goals, and course outcomes should be explained to the stakeholders to ensure that all are aligned with the vision before the start of the course build (Trust & Pektas, 2018). The implementation step should also include training for the students enrolled in the course to assist them with course navigation. Perhaps, the training could be a simple video of the instructor explaining how to navigate throughout each of the modules, the home page, access all assessments, and all other important features of the course (Dong, 2021).

### ***Evaluation***

Finally, the last step of the ADDIE model is the evaluation step, which is composed of formative and summative phases (Dong, 2021). During the evaluation step, the entire course is checked for effectiveness by allowing students to share their thoughts and opinions on whether the course needs any changes to make it run more smoothly and facilitate student learning (Trust & Pektas, 2018). Often, the course evaluation takes place through end-of-course surveys that students are asked to complete. The evaluations are anonymous, and the student can decide if the course meets their expectations and standards (Dong, 2021). Additionally, pre-and post-tests are ideal methods to determine if the students experienced academic growth during the course (Trust & Pektas, 2018). The results from pre-and post-tests could help the instructors measure the effectiveness of the course goals and outcomes (Dong, 2021).

### **The Move from Face-To-Face Courses to Online Courses**

The design process of face-to-face courses is a bit different from those designed as online courses. It is important to ensure the move from face-to-face learning to online learning goes smoothly without causing a disruption in services (Chiasson et al., 2015; Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2020). One of the most notable differences from face-to-face learning is the interaction between instructors and students. Communication in online learning is completed by email or video conferencing and not in person (Chiasson et al., 2015; Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2020). In addition to perfecting online communication, this shift to online learning is a great time to reevaluate one's content, course structure, instructional materials, and all pertinent aspects of the learning environment (Bergiel et al., 2021).

Online courses are not created by converting an existing face-to-face course. It requires new pedagogical tools, a different way to present the course materials, and innovative ideas to promote student satisfaction (Bergiel et al., 2021). Since online courses require students to practice more self-discipline, instructors must ensure the students can navigate through the course, access materials, understand assignment directions, and know that assistance is available when needed (Bergiel et al., 2021). If students are expected to meet specific goals and outcomes, the online learning environments must motivate and engage the students to help each have an optimal learning experience, and this is only accomplished if the courses are well-designed (Chiasson et al., 2015; Glazier et al., 2020).

### **Identifying Outcomes/Goals in Online Courses**

What could be deemed the most important step in creating an online course is identifying course outcomes and goals (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Hart et al., 2019;). Without outcomes and goals, there would be no true way to measure the success of the students (Eom & Ashill, 2016;

Hart et al., 2019;). The course outcomes should be composed of cognitive and affective variables, and the learner's achievement should be the most important aspect of each variable (Daultani et al., 2021). Every course should be designed to assist students in increasing their knowledge of the topic studied, increase problem-solving skills, and help students learn how to apply critical thinking skills to specific tasks (Der-Chiang & Ching-Yeh, 2020).

The main goal of an online course is to ensure the students are retaining knowledge and to have student passing rates increase (Eom & Ashill, 2016; Hart et al., 2019;). When students feel the course is beneficial and goals are being met, an increase in returning students will occur (Daultani et al., 2021). All the goals are only achieved when courses are well-designed and instructors create learning environments worthy of promoting student learning (Daultani et al., 2021). The course effectiveness can be determined by measuring the students' cognitive skills using a tool such as Bloom's Taxonomy which will help the instructors determine if students are indeed meeting course outcomes and goals (Larson & Lockee, 2014).

### **Bloom's Taxonomy in Online Learning**

In online learning, instructors often use Bloom's Taxonomy to measure cognitive skills learned within the course. This will assist the instructor in understanding if adjustments to learning strategies, course materials, goals, and/or outcomes should be made (Cheng et al., 2021; DeMara et al., 2019). With the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy, there are two dimensions of cognition, with the cognition process dimension divided into six levels ranging from high to low (Cheng et al., 2021). The levels: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating all work together to provide insight into the cognitive level of each student in the course (Cheng et al., 2021; DeMara et al., 2019).

The first level, remembering, is the step in which knowledge is provided to the students through instruction. This level hinges on instructors knowing the proper way to deliver course information to the students (Johnston et al., 2021; Pappas et al., 2013). The understanding level is the step in which the students are tested to determine the level of comprehension achieved. This can be completed using assignments such as discussion forums, essays, and quizzes (Pappas et al., 2013). The third level, applying, is the step where instructors assist the students with the application of the knowledge gained with the use of tests or other interactive methods (Amin & Mirza, 2020). The analyzing level involves the students completing the necessary research to develop an even deeper understanding of the materials (Amin & Mirza, 2020; Pappas et al., 2013). The evaluation level allows the instructor to determine better if the students are receiving and processing the information as it should be (Amin & Mirza, 2020). Finally, the creation level allows students to develop a plan or integrate learned knowledge into something that showcases a deep understanding of the topic studied within the course (Johnston et al., 2021; Pappas et al., 2013). Each level of Bloom's Taxonomy, utilized in online learning, is a wonderful way to track conceptual understanding ensuring the students grasp the material being taught in the course (Amin & Mirza, 2020).

### **Developing Content for an Online Course**

Developing content for an online course can be challenging for many instructors or designers. It is important to plan out the course before work begins to determine what elements need to be included within an online course (Larson & Lockee, 2014). The planning and designing of the course can be completed using the ADDIE model to ensure all steps of the course build are met (Dong, 2021). By planning out the content ahead of time, the person designing the course can stay on track in the design process and avoid time constraints. Course

materials must be up-to-date, supplemental materials need to correlate to the course foundation, and technologies must be integrated to enhance the course without causing a distraction (Duvall et al., 2020).

The course content, otherwise known as the subject matter, is the topic that will be studied by the students enrolled in the course (de Jong et al., 2019). In addition to a course designer, there needs to be a subject matter expert to overlook the content section of the course build. The subject matter expert will assist the designer in choosing appropriate materials and ensuring the objectives/goals are aligned properly to the topic (de Jong et al., 2019). If the university/college does not employ an instructional designer, the instructor will play the roles of both the designer and subject matter expert, which could prove to be difficult (Duvall et al., 2020). Course content development is time-consuming and requires hard work; everything must be in place before the start of the course and must be accessible to all parties in the course (Duvall et al., 2020).

The use of textbooks, open educational resources, educational websites, and other pertinent content materials should be gathered to build the content for an online course (Stadler & O'Reilly, 2021). Any and all content resources and learning materials utilized to build the course need to be accessible to the students; there must be a way for the students to study the instructional materials before attempting any assignments or assessments within the course modules (Stadler & O'Reilly, 2021). Course content should be emotionally challenging while providing students with engagement and motivation which will assist the students in achieving success (Berger & Paul, 2021). All portions of online course design and content creation are important for creating and implementing a course that benefits students and instructors alike (Duvall et al., 2020).

## **Accessibility in Online Courses**

Another important part of designing an online course is to ensure that the course is accessible for all students. The course must have a consistent layout to be accessible, be designed to be perceived by a diverse group of students despite any disabilities and allow the student to use assistive technology such as a screen reader if needed (Oswal & Meloncon, 2014). When documents are included within a course, all must have uniform headings, subheadings, and titles to ensure they can be read independently or with assistive technology (Moorefield-Lang, 2019). If presentations are included in an online course, then the use of alt-text is of the most importance, and this allows students with vision impairment to access the presentation and know exactly what is printed on it (Moorefield-Lang, 2019).

Without the addition of alt-text for images, charts, and graphics, the screen readers will not benefit the students who are visually impaired, which could prove to be detrimental to those students (Moorefield-Lang, 2019). When embedding links or videos into an online course, captions and/or descriptions should be included for screen readers to work properly. The use of captions and/or descriptions will assist the students in understanding what the video is referencing (Moorefield-Lang, 2019; Rice, 2018). There are many tools available for designers when the course build begins, using programs such as Google Docs, Adobe, Microsoft, and others; the designer can rest assured that the course will be accessible to all students (Kwak & Newman, 2018; Moorefield-Lang, 2019). Often, instructors designing the online courses will miss the need for accessibility, which could be detrimental for disabled students enrolled in the course who might have a hard time processing information without assistive technology (Oswal & Meloncon, 2014). Course accessibility is another reason why it is important for faculty members to receive proper training when building online courses (Oswal & Meloncon, 2014).



## **Faculty Training**

Faculty members must receive proper training when designing online college courses. Not only do faculty members need training for online course design, but online pedagogical training is a must to ensure the instructors are comfortable in online teaching-learning situations (Ramesh et al., 2019; Vilppu et al., 2019). Colleges and universities must support online instructors through extensive training and continued support (Lowenthal et al., 2019). For students to achieve success, the learning environment needs to meet every student's educational goals. Traditionally, online courses are designed and built over several months, with ample time to work out any issues that could arise (Walsh et al., 2021). However, some instances, such as the more recent COVID-19 pandemic, require course designers/instructors to quickly put together an online course despite prior training (Vilppu et al., 2019). When throwing a course together quickly, important steps/materials can be overlooked, which could be detrimental to students and instructors alike (Walsh et al., 2021).

The key to a successful online course is the time invested in planning and organizing the instructional materials, prompt feedback provided to the students, and further developing cognitive skills (Baran & Correia, 2014; Boudreaux, 2018). With a well-developed course, instructors can focus on teaching and guiding the students to reach their educational goals and learning outcomes. Online learning is a wonderful and exciting learning method for students and instructors if there is proper training and continued support throughout the years (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018). With a focus on learner engagement, the design process of an online course needs to align with design models to ensure the course is of high quality and includes the basic components necessary for the course to operate smoothly (Arghode et al., 2018). The course

instructors thrive when receiving continuous support and training from the universities/colleges to ensure all courses are designed effectively (Vilppu et al., 2019).

### **Instructors' Approaches to Teaching Online College Courses**

To some teachers/instructors, teaching online can be a bit different from teaching in a face-to-face setting. For instance, most online courses are asynchronous, using video conferencing programs and varied technologies for communication purposes when needed (McCutcheon et al., 2015). In online college courses, instructors must be able to provide students with a deeper understanding of the topic and promote ways to expand on each student's prior knowledge (Berry, 2019; Moradi et al., 2018). One great technological addition to an online course is pre-recorded instructional lectures that can help the students feel better connected and engaged in the course (Moradi et al., 2018).

Another wonderful teaching technique is utilizing multi-dimensional instructional content/materials that can reach all learning styles so that no student struggles within the course (Bolliger & Halupa, 2021; McCutcheon et al., 2015). In addition to pre-recorded lectures, PowerPoint presentations and synchronous classes are wonderful additions to online learning that can keep students motivated while having a big impact on students who are visual learners (McGee et al., 2017). Though online teaching can feel less like teaching and more like being in the role of a course facilitator, the instructors are still able to impact the lives of their students (Moradi et al., 2018).

### **Students' Perspectives of Online Learning**

Online learning has become a revolutionary method of learning and has been embraced by students who may not have the opportunity to attend college otherwise (Okech, 2014; Van Wart et al., 2020). For online education to be successful, the students need to be self-disciplined,

motivated, and willing to put forth whatever effort is necessary to meet course outcomes and goals (McCutcheon et al., 2015; Schlenz et al., 2020). When attending online courses, students want to feel as if they are part of the learning experience and be a part of a learning environment that is engaging and intriguing (Carle, 2009; Penrod et al., 2022). With online courses, the students have the flexibility to work at their own pace if weekly assignment deadlines are being met (Carle, 2009).

The world of online learning can be a great thing, but with the benefits comes challenges faced (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). Online learning has increased in popularity, with more colleges and universities offering courses and programs (Sun & Chen, 2016). Students attending online learning environments accept the benefits of online learning along with the challenges; it is not necessarily the easiest method of learning. Still, many students need an alternative method to face-to-face classes (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017).

### ***Benefits of Online Learning from a Students Perspective***

There are many superb qualities and experiences associated with online learning; it is simply a choice for each student to choose what type of learning environment to attend. One great benefit that students notice is how each becomes a bit more technologically savvy with the different technologies incorporated into online learning (Kalman et al., 2020; Taylor, 2002). The flexibility of schedule is one of the main reasons students turn to online learning, and students can attend school from anywhere around the world (Nagl, 2021). In addition, students turn to online learning for a variety of other reasons, including time constraints, conflicting employment schedules, lack of transportation, and other difficulties they are facing (Coman et al., 2020; Lei & Gupta, 2010). Another benefit to online learning is that it tends to be more cost-effective than face-to-face learning (Flavin, 2016; Zhu et al., 2020). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic

shut down all face-to-face classes in educational institutions all around the world (Okasha, 2020). The closing of educational institutions was deemed necessary for the health of all who attend face-to-face classes. With online learning already being mainstream, courses were able to transition online without too much of a fuss. Finally, numerous students are attending online courses and programs who might not have had an opportunity to attend school otherwise due to a variety of reasons (Mayer, 2017).

### ***Challenges of Online Learning from a Students Perspective***

Online learning might not be the best situation for all students, and it depends on each student's individual needs (Mayer, 2017). Being a part of an online learning environment means fewer face-to-face interactions among peers. It is critical that students attending online courses find alternative methods for peer-to-peer interactions to take place (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019). Students need to feel connected to their peers to flourish and experience the growth necessary to be productive. There are a few methods to help students stay connected and feel that they are a part of the course, such as discussion forums and collaborative projects to help promote peer interaction and enhance critical thinking skills (Logofatu, 2018). Another great method for helping students connect with their peers is holding synchronous lectures (Parslow, 2012; Rasheed et al., 2020). The addition of both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities is important for all online courses (Lin et al., 2019). Each of these learning opportunities can impact the way the student views the course and help them stay more connected throughout (Bowen et al., 2013; Maatuk et al., 2020). When students feel connected in an online learning environment, they work harder to complete the assignments and produce better work (Parslow, 2012; Rasheed et al., 2020).

## **Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning for Instructors**

With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, colleges, universities, and school districts shifted all courses to online learning only due to the cancellation of face-to-face learning (Gopalan et al., 2021). The shock of educational institutions shutting down was warranted, and the demand for online learning was frightening as educators struggled to create and implement online courses (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). Many educators were not ready to teach fully online, it was a learning curve for all involved, but the experience proved beneficial despite the hiccups that occurred along the way (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

### ***Benefits of Online Learning from an Instructors Perspective***

One of the biggest benefits instructors have when teaching an online course is the flexibility that allows instructors to teach from virtually anywhere of their choosing, which is perfect when the instructors are traveling and cannot be in one place for a long period of time (Junsay & Madrigal, 2021). Another great benefit of online teaching is the enrichment experience that the students receive when the instructors can provide one-on-one instruction. They also have one-on-one interactions with students via email correspondence and personalized feedback (Junsay & Madrigal, 2021). Online instructors enjoy using technologies to enhance the learning environments that would not have been included in a face-to-face class. The use of technological elements is a great way that instructors can keep the students engaged in the course (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2008). However, with the benefits of online teaching/learning comes a variety of challenges that instructors must overcome to continue producing excellent online learning experiences (Lei & Lei, 2018).

### ***Challenges of Online Learning from an Instructors Perspective***

Perhaps, one of the biggest challenges instructors face in an online learning environment is learning how to appropriately deliver instruction to facilitate student learning opportunities (Lei & Lei, 2018). Additionally, instructors must make an effort to have frequent contact with the students helping each better understand what is expected throughout the course and how to be successful (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2008; Spinks et al., 2021). Reaching out to students often throughout the course is a wonderful way to let each know they are not alone, check-in on how things are going, and discuss any difficulties they might face (Clark-Ibáñez & Scott, 2008; Spinks et al., 2021). Teaching online is difficult and requires strategic planning of all course elements delivered in a variety of ways to reach all levels of learning among the students who are attending the course (Lei & Lei, 2018). However, some instructors feel that the lack of adequate technology experience could hinder the delivery of course content; learning how to troubleshoot any hiccup in technology became all too real for online instructors (Dodson & Blinn, 2022). Despite all challenges that might accompany online teaching/learning, instructors are able to overcome each to persevere and become even better educators than before (Dodson & Blinn, 2022).

### **Online Learning Delivery Methods**

Students who attend online courses need to feel motivated to participate in the course assignments, interact with their peers, and get help if needed. The best way to achieve student motivation is by adding elements that will keep them interested. The use of asynchronous and synchronous instructional delivery methods works best for adding motivation (Casey et al., 2021; Fita et al., 2016). Many colleges and universities require instructors to record and post greetings and lectures to allow the students to develop a connection with the instructor. Lectures and

greetings filmed in advance are a part of an asynchronous course (Lin et al., 2019). The recorded lectures can help the students connect to the materials on a deeper level than simply reading what is laid out in the assignments (Manning-Quellette & Black, 2017; Parslow, 2012). Other forms of asynchronous learning include discussion forums, email correspondence, and video and audio recordings. Asynchronous learning keeps the students held responsible for completing all assignments in a timely manner when working independently (Lin et al., 2019). Asynchronous learning opportunities are a wonderful addition to any online course, but synchronous learning can help students feel like they are attending more of a traditional learning environment (Manning-Quellette & Black, 2017; Parslow, 2012).

According to Francescucci and Rohani (2019), “due to instant feedback and interaction with peers and instructors, students perceived synchronous online interactions positively, thereby increasing students’ engagement in an online learning environment” (p. 61). Technology plays a huge role in synchronous learning; with platforms such as Zoom, Skype, and Microsoft Teams, students and instructors can interact in real-time (Gopal Iyer et al., 2021). Synchronous learning can be used when instructors want to bridge the gap between face-to-face and online courses (Lin et al., 2019). With synchronous learning, instructors must be prepared to handle technology issues that could occur during the live sessions. Synchronous course meeting times require planning, reliable internet, and willing participants (Lin et al., 2019). The best part of synchronous is promoting peer interactions and collaborative projects to provide better communication among students (Francescucci & Rohani, 2019).

### **Collaboration in Online learning**

Collaboration in online learning is vital for students to have the support they need, peer-to-peer interactions, and motivation (Li & Mak, 2021). Collaborative learning can be conducted

in many ways using video-sharing applications and working with Google Docs to send live documents back and forth. Collaboration activities in online learning environments are designed to promote accountability and commitment while offering students a chance to interact socially with peers (Du et al., 2019). In online learning environments, instructors can add collaborative learning with interactive discussion forums, collaborative projects that require two or more students to work on an assignment together, and the use of break-out rooms during synchronous class times. One of the most widely utilized forms of collaboration, discussion forums allow students to interact with each other, expand their knowledge base, and give/receive constructive feedback from other peers (Li & Mak, 2021; Poocharoen & Ting, 2015).

In addition to discussion forums, collaboration in online learning environments can be achieved using social media platforms, electronic whiteboards, and other forms of technology. Technologies added to education can help to revolutionize student learning; technology certainly plays a powerful role in educational settings (Logofatu, 2018). Despite which method is used, it is important that collaborative tools and projects be utilized within education. There are several different approaches to the design thinking process, it is collaborative, human-centered, iterative, and focused on multiple solutions (Brown & Green. 2018). Including collaborative learning in an online learning environment can help ensure that students will be inspired to enroll in online courses in the future.

### **Communication in Online Learning**

In online learning environments, proper communication can be difficult to achieve. One misunderstanding of online courses is that there is minimal communication present within the course (Ashe & Lopez, 2021). This misconception can scare some students from enrolling in an online course for fear that no assistance will be offered if any questions or concerns arise (Ashe



& Lopez, 2021; Aslan, 2021). Designers/instructors need to consider the need for students and instructors to have a way to connect. With effective student-to-instructor communication comes new knowledge and information through the exchanging of ideas to determine the best solution for problems that may arise (Alawamleh et al., 2022).

There are several ways in which communication can be included within an online college course; written communication such as emails correspondence and discussion forums, video conferencing programs such as Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams, and through previously recorded video/audio created by the course instructor (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Many instructors who teach in online learning environments create course introductions and weekly instructional videos to assist the students in learning how to navigate through the course (Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Additionally, when communicating online, it is vital for all parties involved to use proper netiquette to avoid misunderstandings (Ashe & Lopez, 2021; Aslan, 2021). By utilizing netiquette guidelines in online correspondence, the correspondents will be respectful towards one another (Ashe & Lopez, 2021).

### **The Use of Netiquette in Online Learning**

In online learning, effective communication is the key to achieving success and ensuring all students are respectful of one another (Linek et al., 2018; Mintu-Wimsatt et al., 2010). With many learning environments being largely diverse, netiquette becomes more vital to avoid miscommunications that could occur due to numerous reasons (Linek et al., 2018; Mintu-Wimsatt et al., 2010). There are many ways in which netiquette can be utilized in online communication. The first step is to begin all correspondence with a salutation and end each with an appropriate signature (Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Additionally, it is a great idea to proofread one's email/letter before sending it to the recipient to check for mistakes or anything that could

be misinterpreted (Soler-Costa et al., 2021). In online communication, certain words and/or phrases could also be misinterpreted as the recipient may not anything that is not clearly stated, and sarcasm should always be omitted from any correspondence in which one's facial expressions cannot be seen (Linek et al., 2018; Mintu-Wimsatt et al., 2010).

Another rule to remember when communicating online is not to say anything to someone online that one would not say to that person if face-to-face. Once the method of correspondence has been sent, nothing can be done to retrieve it for deletion (Soler-Costa et al., 2021). Privacy is another rule to follow with online correspondence. Instructors should never give out personal information about a student to anyone; doing so will violate the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) federal law that protects the educational records of all students (Soler-Costa et al., 2021). All online correspondence should be completed professionally, address the recipient appropriately, be free from errors, sarcasm/jokes, and curse words, and closely follow the netiquette guidelines (Mintu-Wimsatt et al., 2010).

### **Student Retention in Online Learning**

Student retention occurs when students want to return to the college or university to pursue a degree, whether in person or in an online learning environment. However, many online students might feel that online learning is not suited for them due to the difficulty of the academic program, lack of interaction with the instructor, and the inability to be an independent learner (Salim Muljana & Luo, 2019). When online courses incorporate engaging learning opportunities, students are more likely to feel supported, gain self-confidence, and have the motivation to return in future semesters (Nortvig et al., 2018). For online learning to be deemed effective, student retention rates must increase to show that the students were satisfied with the support and education received (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016).

The inclusion of demographic differences, learning styles, self-regulatory skills, self-efficacy, motivation, and internal focus of control has been attributed to the success of many online students (Armstrong, 2021). Comparing retention rates of students enrolled in online learning versus traditional face-to-face learning environments, online students felt as motivated and encouraged to continue utilizing online courses (Nortvig et al., 2018). Online learning environments can offer students many wonderful benefits if designed correctly, have instructor interaction with the students, offer a variety of learning styles, and allow students to play an active role within the environment. No matter the learning environment chosen, students who are provided with motivation and engaging materials are more likely to return to college in subsequent semesters (Gray & DiLoreto, 2016). The impact of learning plays a huge role in a student's life; success hinges on the education received from well-designed courses and programs.

### **Overall Effectiveness of Online Learning**

Since the beginning of online learning, there have been mixed reviews about the effect that online learning has on education (McGee et al., 2017). There are numerous reasons why some online courses might not be successful such as a lack of instructor training, lack of student motivation, underuse of supportive technologies, and institutions that provide little to no faculty support (Grenon et al., 2019). Some faculty members are concerned about teaching online due to a lack of institutional support, an increase of workload, and the demand to be tech savvy and have technical competency (McGee et al., 2017). With the popularity of online learning, challenges regarding training for online instructors and the development of pedagogical activities are moved to the forefront.

Universities and colleges are still facing difficulties hiring specialized and dedicated professionals despite the rapid growth of online programs that are being developed. With enrollment numbers on the rise in online programs for many colleges and universities, reorganization and task management are vital when creating and implementing online courses versus the traditional face-to-face settings (Grenon et al., 2019). Online instructors can feel undervalued when they are not receiving the necessary support needed to help them be successful as online instructors. It is highly suggested and important for instructors to receive continued support, so the fear of online teaching is no longer an issue and adaptation to an online instructional delivery method is possible (Grenon et al., 2019; Zheng et al., 2020).

In addition to learning how to adapt to online teaching, instructors must design online courses to meet the learning styles of every student. Some students might have learning barriers that could have a negative impact on learning. Therefore, it is necessary for the course instructor to use many forms of technology and instructional materials to complement the course goals and objectives. Online learning environments offer students different experiences from those who attend face-to-face courses (Tan et al., 2016). Using appropriate technologies, teaching strategies, and course materials, online instructors can create a learning environment that is multimodal and multicultural. Instructors do not simply wish for their students to remember; they want students to grasp the course content to facilitate better comprehension. Comprehension can be achieved when the courses/instructors ensure the correct instructional content is utilized (Dirksen, 2016; Fajri et al., 2021). Creating effective online learning environments can be daunting. Learning environments must be designed to help each student comprehend and retain the course goals and objectives (Baldwin, 2019).

## Summary

Online learning has experienced tremendous growth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, partly due to the many technological advances that have been made throughout the past several decades (Sun & Chen, 2016). It is not uncommon to find many colleges and universities offering full programs of study in an online format. Online learning is a great way to recruit students who might not have had the opportunity to attend college for various reasons (Ortagus & Tanner, 2019). Additionally, online learning became necessary when the world faced a pandemic, COVID-19, during the early part of 2020 (Moawad, 2020). With the popularity of online courses, it is important that the courses be well-designed, have knowledgeable instructors, and keep the students motivated to learn (Baldwin, 2019).

Properly constructed online learning environments must include a blend of learning theories, technologies to enhance the course materials, current and reliable curriculum, and other pertinent elements to create fully functioning courses (Dillon, 2018). All students enrolled in colleges and universities have their unique way of learning; therefore, courses should be designed utilizing a multimodal environment. There is no one-size-fits-all model for online courses, and it is about designing learning environments that will help all students reach their full potential (Alamri et al., 2020). Online courses and programs must be effective in meeting the educational needs of all students in attendance. Sustaining the accelerated growth of online learning in higher education is critical for enhancing how courses are designed to maximize the effectiveness of online learning (Park & Kim, 2020).

The world is forever changing, and advancing technologies allow online education to continue its rapid growth and acceleration, thus promoting the benefits of online courses and programs (Park & Kim, 2020). Many universities and colleges continue to expand the number of

courses and programs offered in an online format to better meet students' demands (Sun & Chen, 2016). For online learning to be as effective as face-to-face learning, online learning environments must be well-designed and offer an outstanding learning experience for all students (Logofatu, 2018). Online courses are composed of multiple methodologies, yet the goal is to ensure they remain human-centered, motivational, and focused on student learning (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017).

For online learning to remain an effective learning method, the necessary preparations must be in place in plenty of time to avoid disastrous mistakes that could occur when online learning environments are thrown together hastily, such as the difficulties faced during the COVID-19 pandemic (Penrod et al., 2022). For many online instructors, designing online courses can be intimidating; however, well-designed courses are rewarding when students have a chance to succeed. Online instructors can take a blank canvas and produce an extraordinary learning environment where students will flourish. The goal of this study was to provide an understanding of the perceptions that college instructors have about designing online courses to facilitate student learning. If a lack of design experience is present, the task could prove difficult to achieve (Xie & Rice, 2021). Research on instructors' experiences designing online courses to facilitate student learning is necessary to lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online courses to facilitate learning opportunities for students at Gotham University (a pseudonym). Understanding any strategies used or challenges faced during the course design process is vital for future educators and administrators in higher education. Online learning has become increasingly popular over the past few decades, even more so during the recent COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Asare et al., 2021). With more colleges and universities utilizing online learning, it is apparent that online learning environments must offer technology versatility and various learning activities to promote student learning and success (Gay, 2016). It is important for colleges and universities to include online learning environments to facilitate student learning, keep students motivated to learn, and help each be successful during their educational journeys (Panigrahi et al., 2018). Using a transcendental phenomenological design, this study used real-life experiences provided by the participants to determine if online learning can be an effective learning method. The purpose of Chapter Three was to describe the research design that was used. Additionally, this chapter described the procedures, setting, participants, data collection and analysis, researcher's role, research trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

### **Research Design**

In research, researchers must decide between completing a quantitative or qualitative study. Quantitative research establishes generalized facts about a specific topic (Zyphur & Pierides, 2017). Qualitative research is conducted by studying the perspectives and real-world conditions experienced by the participants (Yin, 2016). A qualitative transcendental

phenomenological design method was utilized for this study and helped to provide accurate details of past experiences from each participant. The transcendental phenomenological approach relies on the consciousness of one's lived experiences to produce unbiased results (Lossky, 2016).

## **Method**

This study used a transcendental phenomenological qualitative method to highlight college instructors' perspectives regarding online course design. The reason researchers choose a phenomenological study is to allow the participants to tell their individualized stories (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher can analyze and interpret the data gathered from the participants and produce an unbiased study (Williams, 2021). With the topic of the study centered around the experiences of college instructors designing online courses, a qualitative study was found to be the appropriate method to receive a better understanding from first-hand experiences. The participants of the study were able to share real-life experiences by answering each of the questions in the study.

## **Design**

The design of this study was deemed the most appropriate as the goal was to understand the experiences college instructors have had with online course design. The study of an experience, phenomenological research produces a description of phenomena that has been previously experienced by the participants (Finlay, 2013). Grounded on first-hand experiences and knowledge from participants who lived through a phenomenon, phenomenological research provides a deeper understanding of the topic studied (Moustakas, 1994). To ensure research is conducted ethically and a true account is recorded, the researcher must remain unbiased throughout the study (Morrell-Scott, 2018).



The phenomenological qualitative research design was determined to be the most effective for this research study because it provided a better understanding of the online course design issues from the perspectives of the course instructors. By utilizing this research design, the instructors provided their experiences with course design and allowed the researcher to focus on greater detail of the phenomenon. The course instructors needed to tell their real-life experiences so the topic can be thoroughly investigated with possible solutions noted for future reference.

### **Approach**

A transcendental phenomenological approach adds dimensions to human experiences and provides a deeper understanding of a study (Fernandez, 2015). Developed by Husserl, transcendental phenomenology is the perfect methodology for researchers who want to understand human experiences (Fernandez, 2015). Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, I collected data from college instructors' first-hand experiences in online course design and had a better understanding of the phenomenon. The first-hand experiences provided credibility for the study, and the participants were able to share information without fear of judgment or biased opinions. Providing an understanding of how something was lived or experienced is the sole purpose of utilizing a phenomenological approach; it allows others to understand the reasoning behind specific situations (Quay, 2015). By utilizing a transcendental phenomenological approach, I was able to delve deeper into the phenomenon and develop a better understanding through the experiences provided by each of the participants.

### **Research Questions**

The interrogative process used to develop qualitative research questions will help shape the study and keep the research headed in the correct direction (Agee, 2009). In order to

understand the challenges of online course design, each research question was designed to provide better insight into the study. All posed questions provided a deeper understanding of how instructors design online courses to promote student learning opportunities.

### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of college instructors in designing online college courses?

### **Sub-Question One**

What types of challenges are faced when instructors are required to design online courses in higher education?

### **Sub-Question Two**

How can course instructors lacking experience feel more supported in designing online courses/programs to create effective learning environments?

### **Sub-Question Three**

How does course design impact socialization and collaboration among peers and cause lower retention rates among students who are dissatisfied with online learning experiences?

## **Setting and Participants**

In research, finding the perfect setting along with the participants is the most vital part of the study (Given, 2008). With qualitative research, the goal is to allow the participants to share their stories and hear their voices (Goldblatt et al., 2011). Therefore, a great deal of thought is placed into choosing the perfect setting before the research begins.

### **Setting**

The setting for a research study is the physical, social, or cultural location where the researcher will meet with the chosen participants to conduct the interview portion of the study (Given, 2008). The chosen setting for this study was conducted at two local universities, Gotham

University (pseudonym) and Arkham University (pseudonym), which usually have enrollments of around 1,500 – 2,000 students per semester respectively. Gotham University's organizational structure involves one chancellor and several vice-chancellors who work together to address academic issues. While Arkham University's organizational structure includes a president and one vice president who are over the academic processes. Both universities have many professors who teach various subjects in both on-campus and online formats.

The courses offered at both Arkham University and Gotham University include online, face-to-face, and hybrid settings. Both universities offer a variety of academic programs, with many being conducted fully online. Both universities offer a variety of extracurricular activities and have diverse populations of students and instructors with varied age ranges, but only Arkham University offers student housing. Being diversified local universities, these sites produced wonderful results and experiences from the participants and helped to provide a deeper understanding of the problem. Both universities were chosen due to the diversified setting, the online programs, and the fact that they do not employ course designers. The chosen participants were college instructors who were currently or had past experience designing online courses in higher education settings despite their lack of knowledge in online course design.

### **Participants**

Researchers must choose participants that will provide insightful information based on past experiences and determine which sampling method will work best (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). The participants of this phenomenological study were selected using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants who will contribute the best and most accurate information pertaining to the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2007). The chosen participants were college instructors who have designed and taught online courses. The

participants were a diverse group of instructors of different ages, races, and genders. One-on-one interviews were conducted using questions created by the researcher to gain accurate information. I obtained permission and consent from the participants before the interviews occurred. The sample size included 12-15 instructors from different departments who have taught and designed at least one online course. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect the identity of each instructor and ensure confidentiality was achieved during the research (Patton, 2015).

### **Researcher Positionality**

As an adjunct professor for the past year and a half, I have witnessed many students struggle in online learning environments. With the COVID-19 virus, most learning institutions transitioned to fully online courses and programs in 2020; many were not equipped to run efficiently in an online format. Students and educators were forced into unfamiliar terrain during the swift transition to online learning, which proved difficult for many involved (Garcia-Morales et al., 2021). I witnessed firsthand the difficulties faced as online learning environments were essentially rushed into existence. Many educators need continued support to overcome the challenges faced with online learning environments (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021).

In addition to the chaos that accompanied online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, I teach courses with a diverse group of students, with many residing in countries that offer very little to no higher education opportunities. I have realized that many of my students attend online courses when they have no other choice, but they are not fully prepared to work independently in an online environment. Every term, I have students reach out to me in distress because they have had no knowledge of APA formatting and other pertinent college skills vital to possess to be successful. After witnessing this repeatedly, I wonder if the courses are designed

effectively enough to help all students reach their full potential. The online learning environments must help every student reach their full potential; otherwise, the course is not an effective learning method. Online courses must include lesson plans, appropriate teaching materials, and be supported with technology to be deemed as effective (Bao, 2020).

As a former instructional designer, I know what elements are necessary to create a well-developed course that will help students acquire knowledge, stay motivated, and retain information. However, in my experience in higher education, both as a student and professor, I realize that many instructors do not know how to design online learning environments to promote student learning. Often, it can be a result of simply not having the necessary training needed to create courses which can lead to a disservice for students and instructors alike. Therefore, I wanted to complete a study that could help determine the causes of ineffective online courses/programs and ways to correct the issues that are discovered.

Aligning this study with ontological assumptions further emphasizes the constructivist belief that one's actions are based on interpretations of past experiences (Gall et al., 2017). During this research, ontological assumptions were further defined through interviews and observations conducted with multiple instructors who had previous experience creating online learning environments that promote socialization and motivation for the students. By providing socialization and motivation for the students, the instructors will promote better opportunities for student learning (Ke & Xie, 2009; Rosen & Kelly, 2020). As a former instructional designer and a current adjunct instructor, I am motivated by this study to expand my knowledge of what could make online learning environments successful in ensuring students achieve their academic goals.

### **Interpretive Framework**

A research study's interpretive framework helps provide a detailed understanding of the

topic being studied through observation (Moisander & Valtonen, 2006). The interpretive framework that was utilized in this study is social constructivism. Social constructivism is normally used to help participants relate experiences to the topic of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interpretive framework of social constructivism was used for this research and allowed all the participants to feel free to discuss their experience in creating online courses intended to facilitate student learning. As the researcher for the study, I was certain to listen to each participant carefully and interpret the data based on the experiences that each share.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

Philosophical assumptions are important because they allow readers to see what assumptions the researcher is making and why the specific methods and purpose of the research were chosen (Tobia, 2015). When completing qualitative research, the researcher brings their own world views while incorporating philosophical assumptions into the study (Cuthbertson et al., 2020). To better guide the research, I explored all qualitative methods and approaches to ensure I was delving further into the topic being studied. The positionality of a research study requires the researcher to be open and honest regarding personal beliefs that might have influenced the study (Lu & Hodge, 2019). A reflexive approach in qualitative research allows the researcher to acknowledge their role within the study (Knoblauch, 2021). Using a reflexive approach, I understand the importance of colleges and universities having online college courses that facilitate student learning and wish to develop a better understanding of college instructors' experiences in online course creation.

### ***Ontological Assumption***

Ontological assumptions in qualitative research are based on the idea that realities can be subjective (Höijer, 2008). My ontological assumption was that an instructional designer should

create college/university online courses. Too often, instructors must create online courses without prior knowledge of online course design. Instructional designers have had coursework and/or training specifically geared towards designing online learning environments. I am aware that instructors could have different realities regarding online course builds being completed by educators, but common ground can be reached with the presence of such differences. Online courses must include the proper technological elements and instructional materials and be designed to help the students gain new knowledge while meeting their educational goals. During the research, I discovered whether the quality build of an online course directly affects the success of students within the course. Some colleges/universities might see lower retention rates among students attending online courses. The lower retention rates are attributed to a lack of motivation and a difference in learning styles (Armstrong et al., 2021). These contributors could all result from poorly designed and constructed online courses created by instructors who lack instructional design experience.

### ***Epistemological Assumption***

The epistemological assumption in qualitative research is used to provide a better understanding and further explain how individuals know the things they know (Rolfe, 2006). The epistemological assumption is commonly used with the social constructivism framework. Using the epistemological assumption allows the researcher to assemble subjective evidence provided by the participants (Rolfe, 2006). My experiences in online learning as both an adjunct professor and instructional designer has made me aware of the difficulties that accompany online courses when creating the courses to facilitate student learning. My epistemological assumption was to recognize and implement the need to build trust between myself and the participants of the research study without any prejudices or preconceived notions. By being respectful, intentionally

listening to any concerns and questions, and being present in the conversations, my participants saw that I was trustworthy. The participants felt better about providing me with their experiences once the trustworthiness relationship was established.

### ***Axiological Assumption***

Viewing the participants' experiences as valuable, using the axiological assumption will assist the researcher in making their biases and values known from the conducted research (Timmermans, 2020). As an adjunct instructor and instructional designer, I understand the importance of creating online college courses to help students be successful and meet all course objectives and outcomes. Since I teach and create online courses, I fully comprehend the necessity of creating well-designed online learning environments that motivate and encourage students to reach their goals. For this to occur, instructors must have the proper training to create online courses effectively. Otherwise, students might lose motivation and could decide not to return to school the following semester. Despite my prior knowledge and experience of the research topic, I realize that I needed to set my biases aside to understand the phenomenon better while keeping an open mind to the experiences relayed by each of the participants.

### **Researcher's Role**

As an adjunct instructor for an online university, I understand the importance of ensuring all learning environments are designed effectively and facilitate student learning. The sites used for the study was the universities where I had received my associate's, bachelor's, and master's degrees, respectively. Being a former student gave me inside knowledge about the different learning environments and academic programs offered at both Arkham University (pseudonym) and Gotham University (pseudonym). Additionally, my time as an instructor has helped me



realize that not all online learning environments are designed well, resulting in poor learning experiences, bad student grades, and low retention rates.

Teaching online courses, I see many students struggle when partaking in online learning environments. Being an online student requires more independence than attending face-to-face classes, which many students can find difficult. The courses I teach are extremely diverse, and every student has their disadvantages when attending online courses. In addition to the lack of technologies and stable internet connections, students complain about not comprehending module assignment instructions. A large factor in this struggle stems from the many different student learning styles present within the course. Therefore, I have adapted the courses I teach to reflect a multimodal learning environment to help all the students succeed. I design such courses by utilizing recorded lectures, PowerPoint presentations, YouTube videos, synchronous meetings, and interactive discussion forums. The courses I teach are designed to align with my experience and knowledge as an Instructional Designer. Still, many instructors simply do not possess the necessary skills to develop courses to help students achieve success.

At both Universities, I was the human instrument and placed my own experiences aside. I conducted the study in an unbiased manner, relying strictly on the thoughts and opinions of each of the participants. The trustworthiness criteria of research require the researcher to remain balanced on the topic and only reflect the experiences provided by each of the participants (Schulz, 1995). With both universities being my alma mater, I ended up having a few participants that I knew from my time as a student. Still, I ensured my biases did not interfere with the research by focusing on the experiences of the participants and using bracketing, and that assisted me in receiving a better understanding of the phenomenon. Bracketing is a crucial part of qualitative research and is helpful when the research includes interviews and observations

(Dörfler & Stierand, 2021), Throughout the study, I documented any biases I may have had and carefully consider ways in which I could set them aside during the research. I was certain that my opinion on the topic was left out of the research by staying focused on what I wanted to achieve with this study. The research study that I produced was ethical, credible, and trustworthy by recording and analyzing all data accurately and appropriately.

### **Procedures**

To begin work on the data collection portion of a research study, the researcher must first obtain all the necessary permissions. For this study, the three data collections used were interviews, document analysis, and observations. Each of these methods assisted in helping me compile data that was accurate and unbiased in relation to the phenomenon. Once all the data was retrieved, I began the analysis process to place the findings into the study and bring better insight into understanding the experiences of the instructors.

### **Permissions**

Consent obtained in research must be written in a language easily understood by all parties involved (Manti & Licari, 2018). To begin the research process, I obtained permission from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct the research (see Appendix A). I also need to obtained consent from all the necessary individuals at both Arkham University (pseudonym) and Gotham University (pseudonym) that approved my research to be conducted on campus (see Appendix B). After my study was approved by both universities, I was given permission to begin the data collection portion of the study.

### **Recruitment Plan**

Once all permissions were granted (Appendix C), I requested a directory of all course instructors and programs of study from the universities to help me narrow down the search for

instructors who teach online courses. In qualitative research, there are a few variations of sampling to choose from when selecting the participants (Coyne, 1997). Purposeful sampling is best to find participants who know about the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). For this study, used purposeful sampling to help me find participants who have experience creating online courses at both Arkham University (pseudonym) and Gotham University (pseudonym). There were 12 participants who have experience teaching online courses that were selected from a pool of 40 potential participants. There were additional forms filled out by the participants at both universities that explained the phenomenon behind the research and what was to be conducted at the site. Finally, each chosen participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix D) before any participation in the research study took place.

Once the selected participants signed the consent forms, I contacted each participant to schedule an interview. The interviews were scheduled via email correspondence as outlined on the screening survey presented to each person as part of the process to narrow down participants. Due to COVID-19 guidelines set in place at the chosen universities, the participants were granted the option to meet in person using safety protocols or meet via a video-conferencing application such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams. There was a set of questions developed by the researcher that each participant answered (Appendix E). Once the interview was conducted, the data analysis process began with transcription of the interviews.

### **Data Collection Plan**

Data collection in qualitative research involves gathering and generating large amounts of data that must be strategically placed within the findings of the study (Sutton & Austin, 2015). There were three methods of data collection utilized during the research: one-on-one interviews, the evaluation of course documents, and observations. Each data collection method utilized

helped to shape the study and provided realistic outcomes of the phenomenon. The data collection began with one-on-one interviews with each of the participants. I then evaluated the course instructional materials used in online courses by the course instructors. Lastly, I completed classroom observations of some of the online and hybrid courses offered by the university. Completing the data collection methods allowed me to gather the results of the research for confirmation.

### **Individual Interviews**

Interviews allow researchers to explore the phenomenon in-depth and provide better insight into the specific phenomenon perceived and experienced by each participant within the study (McGrath et al., 2019). An interview provides the most straightforward approach when gathering specific details surrounding a phenomenon (Barrett & Twycross, 2018). The interview process began by introducing the participants and describing the experiences related to teaching online college courses. After the introductions, it was time to delve into questions that had the participants use more critical thinking which provided me with details about their personal experiences.

### ***Individual Interview Questions***

1. Please introduce yourself. CRQ
2. How long have you been teaching at the university? CRQ
3. What are your teaching expectations pertaining to online course builds? CRQ
4. Please describe the types of courses that you are currently teaching and/or designing to teach. CRQ
5. What are your hopes for your students in relation to your teaching/designing methods?  
CRQ

6. What are your thoughts about online courses and programs? SQ1
7. How many online courses have you taught in a higher education setting? CRQ
8. What type of course design training have you been provided with? SQ1
9. What elements do you feel make online courses run smoothly? SQ2
10. What do you like to include in your online course design to ensure students will be successful? SQ2
11. What are the similarities you immediately noticed in socialization among students enrolled in online courses versus face-to-face courses? SQ2
12. Please describe any differences or similarities you noticed in the instructional delivery methods of online and face-to-face courses. SQ3
13. How are you able to design online courses to be engaging for the students? SQ3
14. Please describe any socialization experiences you have added to online courses that you have designed. SQ2
15. In what ways do you feel online learning would benefit students? SQ3
16. Describe your thoughts on online learning environments and if they can facilitate student learning opportunities. SQ1

Questions one through five provide background information about the participants along with details surrounding their college expectations and experiences. The purpose of these questions was to build a rapport between the participants and the researcher; they are designed to help the participants become more relaxed throughout the process.

Questions six through thirteen were designed to delve more into online course design and what thoughts each participant has based on their own experiences. These questions determined if online courses offer student motivation and engagement and have the appropriate

technologies/elements to be effective (Reigeluth et al., 2017). Majewska and Vereen (2021) stated that “online college courses can lack much-needed student interactions without live synchronous sessions” (p. 1). Socialization is a vital part of a student’s college experience, and it is important that students are provided with alternative means of socialization if they are enrolled in online courses.

Questions fourteen and fifteen were developed to determine if students remain social and are experiencing student-to-student and student-to-instructor interactions. Question sixteen allowed the participants to express their thoughts on ways that online learning can benefit students. Often, online courses are utilized for convenience purposes when students are not able to attend in person due to work hours, distance, or to save on extra expenses that might accompany face-to-face courses (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017). Despite choosing online learning, the courses must offer purposeful degrees through pedagogically sound online study (Ragusa & Crampton, 2017).

Question seventeen ended the interview by having the participants express their thoughts on online learning environments. Preferences for online learning environments hinge on course attributes, topics, and effectiveness (Mann & Henneberry, 2014). Online courses and programs are readily available at colleges and universities around the world, the need for online learning continues to grow, and the design aspects must be exceptional to promote student learning (Eynon & Malmberg, 2020).

### ***Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan***

For this study, 12 college instructors were interviewed to provide their accounts of the experiences each faced pertaining to the phenomenon. Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed each carefully using a software program to ensure each word is transcribed verbatim

of what was stated by the participants. During the transcription process, I remained unbiased by focusing solely on the experiences of each participant and not allowing my own experiences to interfere with my understanding of the phenomenon. The data from each interview was coded into themes inside of an excel spreadsheet using a horizontalization method to provide accurate descriptions of the experiences of each participant (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I created refined themes to ensure sound descriptions of the experiences were secured. Additionally, the spreadsheet included the pseudonym names of each participant, age, ethnicity/race, the interview questions (see Appendix F) asked, and the responses from each participant. Each of the themes in the spreadsheet was coded using a color-coding technique to provide better accessibility and understanding of each section. Individual textual and structural descriptions were added to the spreadsheet that was transcribed verbatim from each of the participant's interviews. The interview analysis entailed a well-planned process and was documented within an audit trail.

### **Document Analysis**

Gathering facts by reviewing documentation is not an easy task, but it is a wonderful way to uncover relevant information that some participants could forget to mention during an interview (Owen, 2014). Documents included in data collection were course instructional materials used to create the coursework the students will complete. I retrieved the instructional documents from each of the instructors/participants upon our first encounter. The course instructional materials were studied due to the importance of determining if the course assignments align with the curriculum being used. The course curriculum needs to expand and deepen basic concepts taught in college courses (Hyry-Beihammer & Hascher, 2015). Reviewing the aforementioned documents ensured that all courses were using current materials, appropriate technologies and have well-constructed foundations.

### ***Document Checklist***

I kept a document checklist (see Appendix G) as I reviewed the course instructional documents during the data collection process of the research study. The checklist included all document types such as textbooks, open educational resources (OERs), exams/quizzes, course syllabus, rubrics, and pertinent documents that the online courses might include (see Appendix F). I ensured the documents I reviewed aligned with the course learning objectives and outcomes. It is important that the courses utilize up-to-date content and ensure that all materials are accessible to the students (Nipa & Kermanshachi, 2020). Any OER utilized in the courses will need to have links available to the students to be certain they can access them easily, and without errors; if students are not able to access the learning materials, they can become discouraged and less motivated to complete the coursework (Nipa & Kermanshachi, 2020). I took notes of each document that I reviewed and recorded the data on the spreadsheet to keep it organized.

### ***Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan***

Another widely used data collection method involves document analysis because it is a straightforward method yielding reliable results. Document analysis in a qualitative research study can provide a valuable source of information, and it does not require the researcher to spend any extra time questioning the participants (Rasmussen et al., 2012). For the study, I utilized instructional documents used by the course instructors to develop the lectures and assignments for the courses. After obtaining the documents from each participant, I thoroughly read through each document in its entirety. After reading the documents, I compared the materials to the course objectives, lessons, assignments, and other pertinent sections to ensure the documents aligned with the course content. Reviewing course documents provided me with a



visual that allowed me to ensure the instructional materials aligned with the course modules.

I determined the technological components of the courses also aligned with the instructional materials; the technological aspects of the course will assist students in becoming better engaged and motivated. I took notes by recording all documented findings into a notebook and later transcribed all data into the spreadsheet containing the interview data using a computer software program. I incorporated a section dedicated to the document analysis that was color-coded to help remain organized and offer better deciphering of the data. The information gathered during the document review was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) research analysis method. I used bracketing to eliminate any data not found relevant to the study. The textual descriptions from each document assisted me in developing individualized structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Using a color-coding method in an Excel spreadsheet, I was able to match the course documents to the corresponding assignments that were present within each course. I utilized the documents to ensure all assignments, quizzes, reading materials, and discussion forums were relevant to the topic and correlated with the documents used to create each element.

### **Observations**

Observations as part of data collection in research can be beneficial in learning the teaching practices of the instructor, seeing the interactions between the instructor and students, and identifying any instructional problems that might be present (Talbot & Campbell, 2014). Observations were conducted in both online courses and hybrid courses that offered synchronous times when they were available. The observations were scheduled with the course instructors to gain permission to attend the courses. I was a non-participant observer to observe the students and instructors as they interact with one another and see how the instructor goes over the materials during a lecture. The goal was to see if the course instructional delivery method offers

engagement and social opportunities to the students, which are vital in ensuring students are successful within the courses. When researchers use observations to collect data, the environment and the engagement of the students will indicate the impact of learning that is taking place (Lier, 1997; McLaughlan, 2022).

### ***Observations Checklist***

I created a form that I used during the course observations to keep up with my findings and the recorded them properly when the time came. The form I used listed typical observation elements such as course name, time/date of visit, the interaction between the instructors and students, engagement of the students, delivery of instruction, technological elements utilized, and other pertinent observational elements (see Appendix H). An emphasis was placed on how well the instructors were able to motivate and engage the students in the course, it is vital that students can feel connected to the course instructor; otherwise, they may become dissatisfied with the learning experience (Morrison, 2021). The form I created helped me stay focused on what elements need to be reviewed during the observations and to retrieve the most accurate information.

### ***Observations Data Analysis Plan***

Observations in qualitative research can be either structured or unstructured, depending on which the researcher chooses to follow (Mulhall, 2003). For this study, I observed at least one course taught by each of the participants I interviewed. Some instructors taught hybrid courses, and others were strictly online. The observations were structured, and I planned to sit in on a course with a synchronous class time to see how the instructor and students interact. The observation helped me learn if the course lectures align with the assignment materials and if the students are motivated when they are together. During the observation, I recorded the findings

accurately and unbiasedly using a form that I created to ensure all data were a true account of what happened.

After I finished recording the findings during the observations, I compared everything I witnessed/recorded during the observation to the course instructional materials, assignments, discussion forums, and quizzes/exams of each course. The comparison provided me with a better understanding of the phenomenon because I visualized how the courses are being conducted and how each aligns with the instructional materials retrieved from the document analysis portion of the study. All data were color-coded and placed within the excel spreadsheet utilized to document the findings from the interview and document analyses. All common themes were easily located due to the color-coding that is within the spreadsheet, making it easy to find critical information quickly if needed. Once the themes were determined using a thematic coding method, I used Atlas.ti to track each and provide me with an accurate account of the common themes.

### **Data Synthesis**

Data analysis has been described as one of the most difficult phases of a qualitative research study (Thorne, 2000). Considering all statements with respect, recording all statements relevant to the study, listing each nonrepetitive statement, clustering units into themes, synthesizing units, reflecting on descriptions, and constructing descriptions of meanings are the many steps involved in the analysis portion of research (Moustakas, 1994). All statements provided by the participants must be considered and transcribed in an ethical manner using verbatim speech (Ramcharan & Cutcliffe, 2002). Additionally, it was important to listen to the statements provided by the participants to show that I was interested in the experiences each had

pertaining to a phenomenon. I built relationships with each participant which helped to ensure that the interactions were pleasant and that I was deemed trustworthy (Anderson & Henry, 2020).

When I began the data analysis portion of the study, I transcribed each of the interviews and remain unbiased to focus solely on the experiences each participant had during their time as instructors. All interviews conducted face-to-face or online were transcribed, and the interviews were transcribed verbatim without any biased opinions of the topic (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcribing needs to include close observations of data with repeated review and listening of the interviews (Bailey, 2008). By focusing strictly on what each participant stated during the interviews, I ensured the data was authentic and accurate.

Another vital step in data analysis is clustering and synthesizing the invariant meaning into units. The collected data must remain constant and unchanged throughout the research process (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Reflecting on and constructing the textural meanings, referred to as imaginative variation, universal structure, and common themes will help me provide accurate descriptions of how each participant experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). As I read over the course documents, I did not judge the work/experiences of any participant or compare their experiences to that of my own. I transcribed my findings during the document analysis unbiasedly to be certain that I am not adding my own opinions to the study. While I reviewed the course instructional documents from each course/instructor participating in the study, I used a memoing technique to make important notes from the documents and observations; it helped me stay organized before utilizing a thematic coding method to keep all data uniform and into appropriate themes. Memoing adds to the credibility of the research and aids in the analysis process of the study (Birks et al., 2008).

In research, data analysis tools are necessary to formulate the data retrieved from the participants (Patton, 2015). The data analysis utilized during the study were composed of interviews, documents, and observations. The use of these three tools assisted me in better understanding the benefits and challenges of online course design from the perspective of the course instructors. After the transcription of the interviews and documents were completed, I moved on to record the findings of the classroom observations. Once again, this step was completed in an unbiased manner using only the notes taken during the observation process. Synthesizing all data through organization, identifiable themes, and a summary of the findings from the spreadsheet was completed along with coding, and the data was organized within properly themed categories with any sub-themes added if necessary. Structural and textural descriptions were integrated during the analysis of data (Moustakas, 1994). After transcribing data from the interviews, document reviews, and observations into the spreadsheet, the findings were plugged into a Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS). Known as a popular research tool for qualitative research, QDAS programs can support all the collected data to create visual representations of the information retrieved (Woods et al., 2016).

### **Trustworthiness**

According to Connelly (2016), trustworthiness refers to “the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study” (p. 435). This transcendental phenomenological study used three data collection methods, referred to as cross-checking data, which will ensure the study is trustworthy. By utilizing multiple methods of collection, the data received provided a more accurate description of the phenomenon being researched (Whiting & Sines, 2012). In qualitative research, the researchers do not utilize instruments to measure the

reliability and validity of the study. Therefore, creating a study needs to establish credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Morrow, 2005).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is a vital part of research and ensures the study will be viable and plausible (Appleman & Sundar, 2016). To achieve credibility in my research, the data retrieved was transcribed and recorded accurately during the analysis portion of the study. For this study, triangulation was accomplished through participant interviews, review of course documents, and course observations to verify the findings from the data collected. Triangulation occurs when multiple data methods can portray different accounts of the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used triangulation of the data collection methods and was provided a better understanding of the phenomenon being researched (Renz et al., 2018). All data collected during this study was authentic and aligned with qualitative research guidelines. Additionally, all participants were sent a copy of his/her transcript to review for accuracy.

### **Transferability**

In a qualitative research study, the person doing the generalizing is responsible for the transferability of the study (Finfgeld-Connett, 2010). Thomas and Maglivi (2011) describe transferability as “the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another, or how one determines the extent to which the findings of a particular inquiry have applicability in other contexts or with other subjects/participants” (p. 153). Data collected in this research study included interviews, a review of documents, and observations to produce accurate findings on the phenomenon. By providing a thick description of my research that was completed accurately and justly, I hope I have brought awareness to the phenomenon.

### **Dependability**

To achieve stability in a research study, the dependability of the findings must be present, thus allowing replication to occur later (Amankwaa, 2016). Providing detailed descriptions and enhancing original findings can establish dependability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). I was able to ensure the dependability of my research with the use of data that was accurate, well documented, and free of errors. Additionally, I increased the dependability of my research by utilizing an inquiry audit from a researcher that is not acquainted with my study. This helped ensure my research's accuracy, trustworthiness, and reliability.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability requires the research to maintain a sense of openness with researchers trying to allow the participants to clarify the statements they provide (Thomas & Maglivi, 2011). Using triangulation, the data collected in this research was organized and remained confidential to protect the identity of the participants. I kept an audit trail that allowed me to stay organized and accurately record the data collected from the participants. Consisting of the interview transcriptions, notes I recorded from the review of course documents, and information gathered from the observations, the audit trail was useful in assisting me to remain unbiased throughout the study. I kept notes of any biases that I encountered and ensured I placed them aside to achieve confirmability. The previous step helped the research meet the expectations for dependability and confirmability.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Throughout a research study, it is important for the researcher to carefully follow all ethical guidelines for such studies (Burles & Bailey, 2018). Many steps were completed before the research began to conduct this study ethically. The central purpose of all research is to protect all participants and the information provided throughout the study (Hoonaard, 2008). As

the researcher for this study, I went through all the proper channels, such as getting site approval (see Appendix C) from the chosen universities, obtaining permission to conduct the study from the IRB (see Appendix A), and obtaining written consent from (see Appendix E) each participant. The participants signed consent forms to inform each of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and research sites to protect the identity of the participants during the study. Additionally, all data collected from the study were secured by a password that protected all files transcribed onto the computer and I placed all other pertinent research documents in a locked filing cabinet located in my home office. All data will be kept for three years at which time each will be disposed of properly and safely.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online course to facilitate learning opportunities for students at Gotham University (a pseudonym). Due to the tremendous opportunities surrounding online learning, colleges and universities are seeing a need to offer more online courses and programs (Gazioglu, 2013). Through online course design, instructors can create learning environments that provide student motivation and promote learning (Franklin, 2017). It is vital to help college instructors understand what elements need to be added to facilitate student learning and learn the challenges faced in the course design process (Gazioglu, 2013). This chapter explained the data collection methods, what design methods were used, and other pertinent information regarding the study's data retrieval and analysis portion. A qualitative transcendental phenomenological design was used to assist the participants in describing their lived experiences and any other vital information they possess regarding the phenomenon. This study followed ethical procedures to ensure its trustworthiness and credibility and was guided by



one central research question along with three sub-research questions. Trustworthiness is perhaps one of the most vital steps when conducting a qualitative research study, as it is the basis for credibility (Shenton, 2004). To help the research be credible, the researcher used a triangulation of data with three methods of data collection utilized. The data collection methods consisted of individual interviews, review of course documents, and course observations. Finally, the research was analyzed with the use of Moustakas' (1994) method once the data collection was completed.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to provide an understanding of the experience college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities. Using a phenomenological design assisted me in focusing on the shared experiences of the instructors and determining if there were similarities in the phenomenon present among them. This phenomenological study was guided by the e-learning theory developed by Mayer et al. This chapter includes descriptions of the participants that were selected using a purposeful criterion, the exploration of outlier data, all responses that will be provided by each of the participants and will be concluded with a chapter summary for completion.

### Participants

The 12 participants in this study were composed of online instructors from two local colleges using purposeful criterion sampling. Each participant is either a full-time, part-time, or adjunct instructor who teaches or has taught at least one online course. An email was sent out to the college to recruit the participants (see Appendix D) who would be partaking in the study. I received responses from several instructors interested in participating in the study. The instructors provided me with their schedules, and we coordinated times and locations to meet for the interviews, document review, and course observations. Protecting the identity of the participants was of utmost importance and was completed with the use of pseudonyms. Please refer to table 1 to view the participants' demographics.

#### Table 1

##### *Participant Demographic Data*

Name*	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Exp.	Content Area	School*	Highest Degree Earned
Donna	F	57	W	17	English	Gotham University	Master in English
Sharon	F	49	W	5	Information Technology	Gotham University	Master in Interdisciplinary Studies
Sandra	F	28	W	4	Computer Science	Gotham University	Bachelor in Information Technology
DeDe	F	33	American Indian	10	History	Gotham University	Master in History; MED in Community College Leadership
Jeri	F	58	W	33	Astronomy	Gotham University	Master in Chemistry
Katlyn	F	62	W	30	Funeral Services	Gotham University	Master in Education
Shannon	F	49	W	25	History	Gotham University	Master in History and Political Science
Jimmy	M	48	W	9	Funeral Services	Gotham University	Master in Educational Technology
Alaric	M	44	W	17	History	Arkham University	Ph.D. in History
Yvonne	F	55	W	12	Instructional Technology	Arkham University	Ph.D. in Learning Technologies
Kay	F	51	W	5	Instructional Technology	Arkham University	Master in Adult and Higher Education
Caroline	F	39	W	10	Leadership	Arkham University	Doctorate in Organizational Leadership

*Note.* \*Pseudonyms

### **Donna**

Donna is a 57-year-old instructor who teaches English courses at Gotham University. She has been teaching at Gotham University for 18 years and has a master's degree in English.

Donna has a master's degree in science and has taught various courses since her employment at the university began. When asked about her teaching experience, Donna responded, "I went to college later in life when I was in my thirties, and I had a full circle moment when I was hired to teach college courses at Gotham University." Her hopes for her students are for each to understand concepts and build a strong foundation of learning.

### **Sharon**

Sharon is a 49-year-old information technology instructor at Gotham University. She has been teaching for the past five years and holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies with concentrations in management of information systems and psychology. When asked how she helps her students be successful in her online courses, Sharon replied, "ample ways to contact me for sure; I also like to allow them to talk to one another. We're a community of learners, and one person may not know everything, so amongst them all, they can help each other." She feels that if instructors put forth an effort to engage online students, each could achieve their goals in online learning environments.

### **Sandra**

Sandra is a 28-year-old instructor at Gotham University, teaching several computer science courses. She has a computer science bachelor's degree and has taught technology courses at Gotham University for the past four years. Sharon is passionate about online learning and enjoyed her time as an online student while completing her educational journey. When asked what her thoughts were regarding online education, she stated, "I think that it is the way of the future; I did my entire master's degree online." When speaking about her hopes for her students, Sandra exclaimed, "I do not want them to struggle with online learning; I want the students to be

successful.” She wishes to meet the expectations of each student and strengthen their knowledge along the way.

### **DeDe**

DeDe is a 33-year-old history instructor at Gotham University, where she is currently teaching US History 1, World Civilization, and Arkansas History, a consortium course. She has a bachelor’s degree in history, a master's degree in Native American, and a second master's degree in college leadership. Eventually, DeDe wants to move into an administrative position and will begin a doctoral program soon. When asked about her current teaching position, DeDe responded, “World Civilization is my favorite class to teach because it is what I like to study. I am not an expert in that subject, and it is my personal interest.” She continued, “I have had a lot of students change their major to history after taking a lot of my classes which I don’t know if it is a good or bad thing. I just want people to appreciate history and help them understand why it is important to learn where their ancestors came from, learning what they did wrong and what they did right.”

### **Jeri**

Jeri is a 58-year-old instructor at Gotham University, where she is currently teaching a health professions course in addition to an astronomy course. She has 33 years of teaching experience and holds a master’s degree in chemistry. When asked to introduce herself, she stated, “I am an educator and have been in education for over thirty years in both math and science departments. I was an adjunct for twenty years and began my full-time career about seven years ago.” She was passionate when proclaiming her desire to make her online courses as much like face-to-face courses as she could. She points out that she includes PowerPoint videos

in her courses to allow the students to learn the material differently, which can assist them in acquiring new knowledge and meeting course objectives.

### **Katlyn**

Katlyn is a 62-year-old instructor at Gotham University who is the current dean of the funeral services department. She has a master's degree in education and has 30 years of teaching experience thus far. As part of her duties as the dean, she teaches two of the courses in the funeral services program. When asked about her teaching expectations, she said, "In my mind, I always wonder what I can do to make sure the students have enough knowledge to be able to pass the boards at the conclusion of the program." According to the results of the last few board examinations, the online students are doing as well or better in some instances than the students attending face-to-face classes. Katlyn explained, "that tells me that our online students are getting what they need just the same as the face-to-face students. We are accomplishing that, and they are successful in the program."

### **Shannon**

Shannon is a 49-year-old history instructor at Gotham University. She has 25 years of experience teaching and holds a master of science degree in history and political science. Currently, she teaches at two universities that use different learning management systems, which has proven to be a bit challenging as both systems are opposite of one another. She seems to enjoy gaining experience in more than one system. When asked about her teaching expectations when designing online courses, Shannon stated,

I tend to provide more resources to online students than I do in a traditional-based face-to-face class; I add extra videos and video lectures. I simply try to hit every style of learning even though statistics show there are no such things as learning styles.

She believes adding more resources in online learning environments can assist those students in being successful in the course. With students possessing unique learning styles, she incorporates multimodal resources that will be beneficial to the students.

### **Jimmy**

Jimmy is a 48-year-old instructor at Gotham University who currently teaches online courses for the funeral services department. In addition to teaching online courses, he also designs most of them. He has nine years of teaching experience and a master's in educational technology. He feels his academic background in instructional design helps him build courses promoting student learning opportunities. When asked how he designs online courses to be engaging, Jimmy stated,

I want to design a course that is easy for students to navigate and add ways to keep the students motivated. I like to add interactives like Kahoots and others where they can be engaged while learning the materials at the same time.

He enjoys teaching online courses and feels online learning might be more challenging than face-to-face classes.

### **Alaric**

Alaric is a 44-year-old history instructor at Arkham University with 17 years of teaching experience. In addition, he has a Ph.D. in history, is the chair of the historical political science department, and is the director of the academic honors program. When asked about his thoughts on online courses/programs, he exclaimed, "I don't like them!" He further explained, "Unless all you're doing is content delivery, I don't see how it works." Alaric made his concerns with online learning known as he feels the best way for students to be successful is by attending face-to-face classes. He did mention that online learning might work in different disciplines but is harder to

achieve with subjects such as history. Compressing centuries of information into shorter segments tends to prove challenging,

### **Yvonne**

Yvonne is a 55-year-old instructional technology instructor at Arkham University. She has 12 years of teaching experience and a Ph.D. in learning technologies. In addition to teaching, she has years of experience as an instructional designer. When asked about her thoughts regarding online courses facilitating student learning, she stated, “I’m a strong believer in online learning since my focus is on designing and creating online courses. Students can be successful with online learning if the courses are designed correctly.” Continuing with that topic, she feels online courses run smoothly when the course foundation is strong. She added, “If you set it up correctly and you have strong measurable objectives, assessments that match the content material, and a strong course introduction that will set the students up for success.” Yvonne works hard to ensure her courses provide engaging content and added motivation for student success.

### **Kay**

Kay is a 51-year-old instructor at Arkham University who teaches in the discipline of instructional technology. She has five years of experience teaching at the collegiate level and has a master’s degree in adult and higher education. When asked what elements she felt make online courses run smoothly, she replied, “I’m really big on providing examples; I provide samples of work and try to be very strategic in how I create my instructions for the course assignments. I try to provide multiple models of everything because I want students to have multiple ways, they can look at the course material.” Kay feels incorporating multiple types of assignments is another way to keep the students engaged in the courses. She states, “adding variations of assignments to



an online course will help to improve opportunities for success.” Her goal is for her students to complete assignments that mean something to them, giving them ownership of their work.

### **Caroline**

Caroline is a 39-year-old instructor of leadership courses at Arkham University. She has ten years of teaching experience and has a doctoral degree in organizational leadership with a content area in higher education. When asked what her design expectations are for her online course builds, she replied, “I try to design online courses that are easy to follow, organized, and ensure they are meeting American with Disabilities Act (ADA) standards.” She mentioned how prior courses did not meet the ADA standards and were not accommodating to the students who needed assistance. She explained an example of how a past course had to be redone, “one course had a red background color that was the color of the book for that course. So, that part had to be updated, ensuring it followed the ADA structure that courses should follow.”

## **Results**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to provide an understanding of the experience college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities. Guiding this study was one central research question and four sub-research questions. Data collection methods were individual interviews, document reviews, and course observations. I completed the data analysis using Moustakas’ (1994) methods of epochē, phenomenological reduction, textural and structural descriptions, and imaginative variation. Each participant was wholly engaged in the interview and willing to provide course documents for review, allowing me access to their courses for observations. None of the participants chose to withdraw from the research study. All participants seemed excited to partake in the study and mentioned the topic was one that needed to be addressed.

Table 2.

*Open-Codes, Themes, and Sub-themes for theme #1*

Open-Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data points	Theme	Sub-themes
Blackboard Training	19	Instructional Design	Lack of Training
Workshops	16		ADA Compliance
Standards	25		Quality Matters Rubric
Curriculum	15		
Structure	12		

**Instructional Design**

The first theme identified during data analysis was instructional design, with three subthemes being lack of training, ADA compliance, and the Quality Matters (QM) rubric. All participants realized the need for and importance of colleges and universities employing instructional designers to assist with online course builds. Participants agreed that online course builds can be challenging when they have little prior knowledge of instructional design principles. Understanding that instructional design is a whole other job, Sandra stated, “instructional design is the hardest part of the course builds; I have the teaching down pat. The structural design takes a lot of time, and I must start designing for an upcoming term while teaching courses in another term.” Another participant has a background in instructional design and realized how difficult that task can be. Jimmy explained, “I have a master’s in instructional design, so I actually really enjoy that part, but it is a lot of work for instructors who do not have that background; it is difficult for them.” DeDe, Sandra, Katlyn, and Donna mentioned they turn to a staff member who has experience with the Learning Management System (LMS) utilized by the university when they need assistance with their course builds. Dede stated that, “a staff

member held my hand the first year I started teaching and designing courses. COVID had just become a pandemic when I started teaching, and we had to move to remote learning. Explaining the fears that came with online learning, Dede further exclaimed, “I think I had that staff member on speed dial to overcome any challenges I faced while designing my online courses.” The participants agreed that additional online course design training could prove to be beneficial in assisting instructors in designing quality courses.

### ***Lack of Training***

The first sub-theme identified under instructional design was the lack of training expressed by the study participants. Sandra stated, “I really wasn’t given any online course design training when I started teaching, but I was provided with a mentor, so to speak. She continued by asserting, “I guess I did a little bit of training with her; I met with her one day, and she kind of went over Blackboard with me.” Sandra went on to further explain, “however, that brief training didn’t tell me what kind of assignments I need to be including, which left me relying on teachers who had taught the course in the past to see how they structured them.” The participants referenced a lack of design training as something that was desperately needed. Katlyn stated, “when instructors get ready to design an online course, we have a rubric that is provided to us as a design guide.” She continued, “if there’s something that you don’t understand on the rubric, you can ask a staff member for help, but we had no formal design training to speak.”

### ***ADA Compliance***

The second sub-theme identified under instructional design was ADA compliance. Several participants were concerned with ensuring the online courses complied with ADA standards. Donna stated, “without design training, it was difficult for many instructors to know

how to incorporate ADA standards and keeping the courses in compliance with them.” Caroline explained,

I use a lot of YouTube videos that I must be certain are ADA compliant with transcriptions and such. Because we do not have any instructional facilitators or designers, it is up to the instructors to make that happen. So, I rely heavily on my publisher, Sage, or whatever publisher I’m using at that time. Often, the videos from the publishers are already transcribed, which helps.

### ***Quality Matters Rubric***

The third sub-theme under instructional design was the Quality Matters (QM) rubric. In reference to online course design training, Alaric stated, “I had QM training which was kind of a big thing back in 2015 or whenever that was.” Results indicated that the participants considered QM training to be beneficial when someone has no instructional design training or knowledge. Caroline stated, “I guess the best training provided to instructors was QM training and certification courses. Years ago, our courses that aligned with the QM rubric were rewarded at the institutional level. After a brief pause, Caroline continued, “I took advantage of all training opportunities that covered online course design; we were not required to do so but were highly encouraged to attend trainings.” Although the participants love QM rubrics, the participants mentioned that the universities have decided to use other forms of training and do not use QM any longer.

Table 3.

### ***Open-Codes, Themes, and Sub-themes for theme #2***

Open-Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data points	Theme	Sub-themes
Discussion Boards	88	Socialization	Collaborative Projects

Zoom	17	Communication
Messages	28	
Lecture Videos	69	
Announcements	24	

## **Socialization**

The second theme identified was socialization, and the two sub-themes that were associated were collaborative projects and communication. All participants agreed that one of the hardest parts of teaching online courses was finding ways to help the students be sociable with their peers and instructor. Dede stated, “socialization in online courses is difficult because the online students do not seem as engaged as students attending face-to-face classes.” The participants were not sure if online learning could successfully incorporate socialization like face-to-face classes. Alaric explained, “online students don’t get that face-to-face interaction with their peers. Discussion boards help provide a decent amount of interaction between the students, but beyond that, there is not really a lot of interaction and socialization happening in online learning.” After a brief sigh, Alaric continued the conversation by stating, “in online learning environments, you invite students to introduce themselves, that invites them to get involved immediately. By inviting, I mean require, and for whatever reason, it is easier to require participation in an online environment.”

Several participants confessed that socialization in online learning might suffer due to instructors not knowing how to add elements that further promote socialization among the students. Jimmy explained, “I use discussion boards but am not sure if the students are engaged or whether they like them. I feel introduction discussion forums help the students start to form a bond just so they don’t just know that person as a name on the screen.” He continued to explain other ways he promoted socialization by stating, “I like to add peer reviews when they are

writing a paper or something; I have students look at the work of someone else. It seems critiquing someone else's work is a hard one for the students though." One participant found an additional way to add socialization among her students; DeDe stated, "last summer is the first time I started making them do PowerPoint assignments; each student is required to go through the PowerPoints of the other students and respond to at least one of them;" She felt that the PowerPoint assignments provided additional interaction among the students. The participants all agreed that discussion boards were the easiest method of adding socialization to online courses. Sandra supported that idea and added, "I want to do more with socialization, but I don't really know what to do, and I think that is probably where an instructional designer could come in and show me some more options that would be better."

### ***Collaborative Projects***

The first sub-theme identified under socialization was collaborative projects. The participants agreed that collaborative learning is a fantastic addition to an online course as it helps with socialization, brings out each student's strengths, and allows the students to develop stronger problem-solving skills. However, some participants struggled to create collaborative projects in online learning environments. Jimmy asserted, "for collaborative projects, I normally include peer reviews or something similar. I also try to incorporate at least one live class session on Zoom where the students can work together to answer questions and such." The participants loved the idea of adding more collaborative projects; most were just unsure how to execute them properly. Yvonne explained, "I do group work; I make them use multimedia to complete group projects. It's not popular, but in the real world, you must work with other people, so you have to do it whether you like it or not."

### *Communication*

The second sub-theme identified under socialization was communication. All participants expressed the need to add several methods of communication to their online courses. Sharon exclaimed, “I include ways for students to keep in touch with me and other students with the use of an application called Slack. The students can text, not only me but the entire class, and get a response.” Alaric stated, “in an online environment, you invite the students to introduce themselves and get involved immediately. I also include small group discussions and force them to participate in a call or synchronous meeting.” The participants agreed that communication in an online course can be a bit tough to achieve, but each explained multiple ways in which they do their best to open those lines up to allow students to feel supported. Kay asserted, “my discussion boards are weighted heavily because I put a lot of demands on it. One of the demands I put on the discussion board is when students respond to a classmate, they must ask probing questions.” After expressing the students must follow all discussion prompt instructions, Kay continued, “also, when that classmate answers the question, they must go back and respond once again. So, there must be back-and-forth conversations between the students.”

Table 4.

#### *Open-Codes, Themes, and Sub-themes for theme #3*

Open-Codes	Frequency of open-code appearance across all data points	Theme	Sub-themes
Assignments	29	Effectiveness of online learning	Benefits
Course			Engaging
Foundation	15		Materials
Flexibility	20		Instructor
Feedback	32		Presence
Structure	19		

## **Effectiveness of Online Learn**

The third theme identified was the effectiveness of online learning, and the three sub-themes associated were benefits, engaging materials, and instructor presence. The participants all expressed concerns about the effectiveness of online learning if the course builds were not designed well enough to facilitate student learning. Yvonne stated, “I work really hard to model the good online course design that I teach in my classes in the instructional technology department. Make sure I have strong measurable learning outcomes, and actually, measure all of those outcomes.” It was unanimous among the participants that online courses could benefit students when they are effective. Sharon exclaimed, “effective online courses offer consistency because as a student and also as faculty, I know what to expect and what the week is going to look like.” Another participant, Donna proclaimed, “an effective online learning environment should offer clear communication, organized structure, clear instructions, a schedule of assignments, and instructional materials that correlate to the subject. Students need courses that offer motivation to keep working towards their goals.”

### ***Benefits***

The first sub-theme to emerge under the effectiveness of online learning was benefits. The participants expressed that there are many benefits involved in online learning. Kay asserted, “I think one of the best ways that online learning benefits students are it gives them the flexibility to have access to an education they would otherwise not have access to.” The participants realize that many students face challenges that could keep them from returning to and/or attending school if not for online learning opportunities. Jeri proclaimed, “ever since COVID, I have been recording every message and lesson daily so that if a student is absent one day, he or she can log in and access that missed lecture for that day.” As pointed out by Shannon,



“students can take courses without having to move, if they have an illness, if they are a stay-at-home parent, or if they are working shifts that interfere with in-person class times.” Shannon continued to express her fondness of online learning by asserting, “online courses benefit students in a way that allows them to work and go to school when it might not have been possible prior to online learning.”

### ***Engaging Materials***

The second sub-theme to emerge under the effectiveness of online learning was engaging materials. The participants all spoke about the importance of incorporating engaging materials into an online course to keep the students motivated to learn. Jimmy stated, “if you add a video, do not just do a PowerPoint with your voice in the background, the students will fall asleep.” He explained a better way to make videos and PowerPoints more engaging by stating, “show your face to them and include some games like a quiz to help them learn definitions and terms. See what games are out there, something that they can be involved with.” Jimmy felt strongly about creating online environments that are engaging and motivating for his students. He feels that the interactive games he adds to his courses provide engagement as well as a new way for the students to acquire new knowledge.

Sandra exclaimed, “instructional videos are a great way to add engagement to a course. With assignments, I do a screen recording of the lecture and tell the students to watch it.” She continued by stating, “when they follow along with what I am doing, this helps them learn the steps of the assignment.” Caroline stated, “for engagement, I include a welcome message, some videos, an introduction to the course, and an organized curriculum.” The participants stated they work hard to help the students stay engaged in their courses. Each participant felt that students

enjoy videos of some sort being added to an online course as it provides a way to learn other than simply reading text on a screen.

### ***Instructor Presence***

The third sub-theme to emerge under the effectiveness of online learning was instructor presence. The participants expressed the need for the students to feel the instructor's presence within an online course. Katlyn exclaimed, “call me crazy, but I give my cell phone number to my students. I do this because they have practice tests every day, and sometimes they are completing the assignments in the evening when they get home from work.” Her reasoning behind providing her students with her number is for the students to always have a way to contact her. Kay asserted, “to show a presence in an online course, instructors should engage in the discussion boards. I try to increase my instructor presence by engaging with students in the discussion boards.” Kay continued to explain ways in which an instructor’s presence could be added in online learning by stating, “I also hold Zoom meetings so that the students can log in and speak with me and discuss aspects of the course.” The participants realized that instructors being present within the course was vital for student success in online learning. Katlyn stated, “for online learning environments to work, there has to be instructor relationships with each student. The students need that accountability and are more willing to do the work because they feel like you actually give a crap.”

### **Outlier Data and Findings**

Unexpected findings will be discussed in this section that was developed from the study. The findings proved noteworthy as they added a new dimension to the study results. The two outlier findings were a dislike of online courses/programs and the lack of ways to keep students

from cheating on the assignments without being in attendance in a face-to-face course. Both findings will be discussed below:

### ***Outlier Finding #1***

One participant made it clear that he was not a fan of online learning. When asked about his thoughts regarding online learning, Alaric exclaimed, “I do not like them; I suppose that is the short answer, I just don’t. To me, the actual interactive element of learning is so vital. I have just never found any asynchronous online wizardry that can replicate that.” He continued, “unless all you are doing is content delivery, I just do not see how it will work.” Alaric did not feel students were offered a lot of value by the instructor if the instructor is simply providing the students with a curation of the learning materials. He concluded his disapproval of online courses by stating that online learning might work for other disciplines, such as math, but as a history instructor, he feels students are being shortchanged.

### ***Outlier Finding #2***

While most participants thought online learning was wonderful and opened doors to students who would otherwise not have such opportunities, one participant expressed her concerns that she feels online students’ cheat. Shannon exclaimed, “one difficult part of online learning is academic integrity because you are not there to see who is cheating and who is not.” She continued this topic by stating that she knows the students in her online course are cheating and tries to weigh things differently to accommodate it. She stated, “I question if they know the content well, but it would worry me more if it was a medical student who is needing to learn how to save somebody’s life.” Shannon did mention that the university does take extra measures to help prevent students from cheating and she feels confident that most of her students are actually learning the material.

### **Research Question Responses**

Guided by one central research question and three sub-research questions, this transcendental phenomenological study sought to bring insight into instructors' experiences' in designing online courses to facilitate student learning opportunities. There were three themes identified when the data analysis was completed: (a) instructional design, (b) socialization, and (c) effectiveness of online learning. Each of these themes offered support to the participants' responses provided during data collection.

#### **Central Research Question**

What are the experiences of college instructors in designing online college courses? The instructors provided descriptions of their experiences with online course design. The study showed that instructors are required to create their own online courses with little to no prior design training. Before the course designs took place, the instructors were provided with outside resources and were in attendance during a couple of workshops. However, no true training in the LMS was provided to the participants. Most of the participants from Gotham University relied heavily on a staff member, Bonnie (pseudonym), to assist them in their course builds. DeDe mentioned, "Bonnie is our LMS facilitator, she held my hand the first year when we had to go remote. Fresh out of grad school, I had never taught an online college course, I had Bonnie on speed dial that year." Katlyn stated, "as far as building online courses, we had a few trainings possibly at the beginning of a semester. Bonnie is over our online courses, and she provides us with a rubric to adhere to when building the courses." She continued by exclaiming that no formal online course design training was provided to the instructors which is why so many relied on Bonnie to assist them when they had to design their online course. She stated, "as for formal training, we have not had any."

### **Sub-Question One**

What types of challenges are faced when instructors are required to design online courses in higher education? The results of this study revealed the participants are all required to design and set up their online courses. All participants expressed concerns in the design process as none have had formal training in instructional design concepts. Sandra asserted, “I really wasn’t given any training; I was provided with a mentor, so to speak.” Supporting this assertion, Jeri stated, “no training was provided.”

The participants realized how difficult online course design could be and how time-consuming it can be. Caroline exclaimed, “we do not have instructional designers, it is up to the instructor to develop their online courses. The university did offer some Quality Matters training and rubrics, but it was just up to us to make the courses happen.” Donna stated, “as for online course design training, we had various workshops and stuff like that, but I learned more by asking a former colleague for assistance.”

### **Sub-Question Two**

How can course instructors lacking experience feel more supported in designing online courses/programs to create effective learning environments? The participants all expressed concerns in relation to building effective online courses that would benefit the students. Sandra stated, “I have the teaching part of a course down pat; it is the structural design portion that is difficult and, without a doubt, a whole other job.” Sounding a bit overwhelmed she continued, “I would like to see more Blackboard training over the courses that are not as basic as how to put in an assignment that past trainings have included.” All participants mentioned LMS trainings such as workshops, mentors, and the assistance of their colleagues. However, they all expressed a desire to have the addition of an instructional designer to the universities or to have a bit more

formal training than in the past. Sharon explained, “I was familiar with Blackboard as a student, so as an instructor, I used the structure of the course I inherited from the previous person.”

Collecting her thoughts, she continued her statement by adding, “she was essentially my trainer who stepped in and answered any questions I might have had; she was kind of like my mentor.”

### **Sub-Question Three**

How do course designs impact socialization and collaboration among peers and cause lower retention rates among students who are dissatisfied with online learning experiences?

Most, if not all, of the participants, agreed that online courses add a level of difficulty when designing the course to include collaborative projects and more socialization opportunities.

When discussing the best way to add socialization to an online course, Jimmy asserted, “discussion boards are a go-to for most instructors; you can have the students engage with each other.” It seemed that discussion boards were popular among the participants as each mentioned adding them to their courses for socialization purposes.

Other participants loved the idea of including collaborative projects that provide an extra form of socialization among the students. Yvonne stated, “I do a lot of interactive assignments that I want them to truly engage in; I want them learning from one another.” After a brief pause, she asserted, “the students must say each other’s names when they are writing to each other, it helps to create a community.” She explained that group work is necessary to help students become prepared for real-world experiences once they enter the workforce and have to work alongside their colleagues. Some participants focused more on socialization through discussion forums and other communication tools. Other participants emphasized collaborative projects and group work to build peer-to-peer relationships. All participants agreed that both elements added to online courses were excellent ways to help students build rapport and stay engaged.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided insight into the transcendental phenomenological study focused on instructors' experiences designing online courses for student learning opportunities. It was clear that the participants faced challenges when designing online courses due to a lack of training provided by the universities. The findings of this study were organized with three themes, eight sub-themes, two outliers, one central research question, and three sub-research questions. The themes that emerged from this study were instructional design, socialization, and effectiveness of online learning. Though both universities offered help with online course builds using workshops, specific task trainings, and providing a mentor, the instructors still explained the challenges they faced when designing their online courses. However, the participants worked through all design problems and put forth great efforts to create online learning environments that offered students structure, organization, instructor presence, peer-to-peer interaction, and the opportunity to further advance their educational journey.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to provide an understanding of the experience college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities. This chapter begins with an interpretation of the findings that are presented through each of the identified themes and sub-themes. Other topics included in this chapter are the implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, the limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research. This chapter will proceed to conclude with an overall summary.

### **Discussion**

This phenomenological study explored instructors' experience's designing online courses that can facilitate student learning opportunities. This section will start with the study's findings in relation to the themes: (a) instructional design, (b) socialization, and (c) effectiveness of online learning. In addition, this section supports the interpretations of the findings along with evidence provided by the participants of the study. All themes and sub-themes aligned with the theoretical overview of the study will be addressed and explored. Finally, recommendations for future research of instructors' experiences in designing online courses will be examined and explained.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Twelve participants were identified using a purposeful sampling method. Each participant held a bachelor's degree or higher and was employed as an adjunct or full-time college instructor. All participants were responsible for designing their own online college courses without the assistance of an instructional designer. Three themes and eight sub-themes were discovered during the data analysis. This section summarizes and interprets those findings



as expressed by the participants of the study. The themes noted during the study were instructional design, socialization, and the effectiveness of online learning. Additionally, the sub-themes further expanded upon the themes and highlighted the importance of each. Pertaining to instructional design, the participants agreed that formal training would benefit them greatly when designing online courses. One area in which the participants struggled when building the online courses was adding appropriate socialization aspects to assist the students with peer-to-peer interaction. Furthermore, all participants worried about the effectiveness of online learning if the courses are not built with a foundation strong enough to promote learning. Previous research indicated that in instances such as the Covid pandemic, colleges and universities had virtually no time to plan how to design and conduct online courses (Khalil et al., 2020; Ye et al., 2022).

### ***Summary of Thematic Findings***

The three themes that emerged from the data analysis were: instructional design, socialization, and the effectiveness of online learning. Each theme was aligned with the theoretical framework of the phenomenological research study conducted. The sub-themes included under the instructional design theme were ADA compliance, Quality Matters (QM) rubric, and lack of training. The instructors expressed the difficulties that accompanied online course builds when there is not a lot of training provided. To create strong foundations in online courses, many instructors like to use a QM rubric, or a similar one, to assist them in designing courses that are compliant with ADA standards. The instructors take pride in knowing they put forth the effort necessary to create well-designed online courses.

The socialization theme included collaborative projects and communication as the sub-themes. The instructors expressed concerns regarding the socialization aspects of the online courses. Many instructors wondered if additional collaborative projects could be included in their

courses along with the standard discussion forums. Most instructors were unsure how to add collaborative projects and elements into the courses. The instructors asserted the importance of adding and implementing collaborative projects to assist with better peer-to-peer communication. Communication in online learning was another challenge faced by the instructors; most utilized the discussion forum as the main source of peer-to-peer communication. However, the instructors made certain the students had ample ways to reach them if they needed assistance.

The theme of the effectiveness of online learning included the sub-themes benefits, engaging materials, and instructor presence. Instructors described many benefits associated with online learning, such as accessing the course from anywhere the student is located, the flexibility of time, and lack of interference with one's work schedule. Despite the many benefits of online learning, some instructors questioned whether the materials were engaging and if instructors were present in online learning; they perceived both are crucial to student success. Many instructors achieved instructor presence within the courses by engaging with students in the discussion forums, providing quick responses to emails, and allowing students to use a messaging app to contact them as needed. Additionally, the instructors noted that the courses were engaging due to the addition of interactives, discussion forums, group chats, videos, and other elements that were added to promote engagement among the students. The main takeaway of the effectiveness of online learning is to have a strong design foundation and add vital course components to promote student learning.

**Instructors Desired Mentorship from their Colleagues.** Instructors with little to no instructional design training face challenges when designing online courses. Resilient instructors have learned to lean on their coworkers for assistance while using course layouts from previous semesters. As the instructors spoke about the lack of actual course design training, it became

apparent that most have acquired their design skills by learning as they go. For instance, Donna stated, “while we have had training workshops, I learned largely from a colleague, April (pseudonym), who had experience teaching online.” Many college instructors might find it uncomfortable to design online courses that offer similar value as face-to-face settings, some are unsure how to integrate technology for student engagement (Achen & Rutledge, 2022).

The support offered by colleagues helped the instructors feel more confident when designing their online courses. When instructors have a mentor guiding them with the set-up of online courses, integration of technology, and social support, they gain the knowledge necessary to create effective online courses (Brady, 2018). With slight frustration regarding lack of design training, Sharon asserted, “it was my co-workers who actually stepped in and answered any questions that I might have had.” In agreement with Sharon, Jeri stated, “all my better ideas came from other instructors who paid it forward and explained what they do which works well.” The instructors appreciated all support their colleagues offered, and each was receptive to the assistance.

**Instructors are Committed to Promoting Engagement in Online Learning.** Another concern mentioned a great number of times was the lack of knowledge in creating engaging online courses for the students. Some challenges pertaining to online course design are peer-to-peer connections, motivation, and creating lessons and assignments that will keep the students engaged (Theodosiou & Corbin, 2020). Kay exclaimed, “one thing I do to help with the engagement aspect of my online courses is the addition of little videos.” She continued by adding, “another thing I do is pop on Zoom to do a quick overview of the modules; I think it helps them to see their instructor and not just read text.” Engaged students will devote more time to their studies by placing greater effort on meeting the timelines for the assignments and

exhibiting a heightened interest in the learning content (Han & Hamilton, 2022; Luo et al., 2021).

The instructors expressed their willingness to add more engaging course elements if they knew how to do so appropriately. Sandra stated, “I think the engagement part comes from hands-on activities because they are so much better than just completing a quiz. With hands-on assignments, the students get to see real-world experiences and seem to enjoy that part.” Despite the type of engagement elements added to an online course, learner engagement is critical for the quality of online learning and student performance (Wang et al., 2022).

**Instructors Desire to Build Online Courses with Strong Foundations.** Despite a lack in design training, the instructors desired to create online courses that are built on strong foundations that promote student learning. Students in online learning environments succeed in courses that are designed using pedagogical content that supports the outcomes and objectives listed in the course (Duvall et al., 2020). Yvonne stated, “I want my students to learn, and I want to know they have learned. I work hard to model a good online course design, and I make sure I have strong measurable learning outcomes, and I measure those outcomes.” Caroline explained, “I try to create structured environments that are diverse where people feel welcomed, respected, and understand they must behave a certain way to follow specific standards.” She continued by asserting, “I also make sure everyone understands netiquette rules and what is appropriate in the course versus what is not.” A well-designed and structured course can essentially assist in building a community among the students, which will attribute to better motivation (Studebaker & Curtis, 2021).

All the instructors agreed that strong courses create better learning opportunities and stronger retention rates. Jimmy mentioned, “I want my students to be interested in the materials,

for my course to be easy to navigate, and be a place where they can be engaged while learning.” Jimmy further explained, “this is how I design my courses to be. I lay out a strong foundation to build upon. In most instances, there is a lot more work going into an online course versus my face-to-face courses.” Online courses should be built similarly to how an instructor would build face-to-face courses; both methods should include the same pedagogic principles with additional steps added to the online format (Bruce et al., 2021; Kinnear et al., 2022).

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

This phenomenological study supports the importance of instructors being supported with additional online course design training to help them feel more confident and less stressed. Their experiences in online course design were portrayed as challenging and demanding. The instructors want to design online learning environments that are engaging, motivating, and effective. The recommendations for access to additional design training are intended for college instructors and administrators. The subsections below detail the implications for policy and practice that include any recommendations to the policymakers and stakeholders.

#### ***Implications for Policy***

The findings of this phenomenological study provided a look into the obstacles encountered by the instructors when designing online college courses. Most of the participants struggled with the design process of their online courses. Most of the participants partaking in this study had little to no experience teaching online courses, much less designing them. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a shift from face-to-face classes to online courses during the spring term of 2020, and many of the instructors were not prepared for that shift to occur. Instructors had to quickly create an online college course without much assistance. Knowing the hardships that the instructors encountered during the pandemic and simply

designing online courses in general, university policies should allow for better design training before the start of each term. Policies should be established that will provide instructors with LMS workshops, one-on-one training for assistance, additional professional development classes that cover the topic of online course design, and hands-on training. The implementation of these policies focusing on remote instruction will help the instructors feel less frustrated and discouraged when designing their online courses.

### ***Implications for Practice***

This research study aimed at determining the online course designing experiences of college instructors at two local universities in Northeast Texas. The findings show it is necessary to examine the policies of the universities pertaining to instructor training. This study showed that instructors are designing online courses despite their apprehensions due to a lack of support and knowledge in the design process. Instructors long for increased training opportunities to learn effective methods in designing online courses that accommodate many learning styles, offer collaboration among students, provides student engagement, add appropriate technological elements, and assist students in being successful. Additionally, this study could prove to be beneficial to other universities regarding their practices on online course design training for the instructors. The study indicates that universities must provide better support to the instructors to help them feel better supported.

### **Theoretical and Empirical Implications**

This phenomenological study explored instructors' experiences designing online courses for student learning opportunities. This section will present the theoretical and empirical implications of the study. A total of twelve participants were able to describe their experiences with online course design in relation to the need to ensure online courses can promote student

learning when designed effectively. The theoretical and empirical implications of the study are explained in the subsections below.

### ***Theoretical***

The guiding theoretical framework for this phenomenological study was the E-learning theory by Mayer et al. (2016). E-learning defines the way a student learns in a manner that is enabled by the use of electronics (Mayer et al., 2016). The findings discovered during this study correlated with Mayer et al. (2016) e-learning theory. Many instructors have had some experience with online learning but did not have a lot of design training. However, when new instructors were faced with the task of designing their online courses, they were able to model their courses after the work of a colleague who had previous experience with online instruction and design.

This study discovered that instructors' experience with online course design aligns with the e-learning theory principles that well-designed online courses will provide comprehensive pathways for students when created to help them meet their educational goals. This theory stresses the importance of segmenting online courses into smaller sections that keep students focused and engaged (Chen & Yen, 2021). This study validated that the e-learning theory supports instructors as they learn to design online courses that allow students to reach their goals and objectives while avoiding a cognition overload (Mayer, 2021).

### ***Empirical***

The empirical significance of this phenomenological study was to close a gap in current research on well-designed online college courses being effective enough to promote student learning opportunities. The findings in this study addressed many topics discussed in past literature reviews, such as challenges faced by online course instructors, lack of design

experience, non-stimulating courses, and poor academic grades by students. Additionally, this study confirmed that instructor-built online courses should be explored to check for inconsistencies and issues that could arise (Chen & Carliner, 2021). My study, like others, identified difficulties faced when online courses are built without the assistance of an instructional designer. Hultberg et al. (2018) identified course design difficulties such as unfamiliarity with emerging technologies, unaligned instructional materials with the course content, and an overload of information.

Empirically, the data collected and analyzed from this study expanded upon the challenges some college instructors faced when teaching online courses. With the use of one-on-one interviews, document reviews, and course observations, the participants provided a representation of how they felt and the struggles they experienced while designing their online courses at the start of a new term. The instructors found solace in leaning on their colleagues when they had questions or concerns during the course builds. Through the assistance of their colleagues, the instructors learned ways to add emerging technologies, provide peer collaborations, and be present when the students reached out to them. If instructors are to fill the roles of instructional designers, they must design online courses that include the appropriate learning materials, technologies, and elements necessary to offer the support and guidance needed by the students (Brigance, 2011; Lewis, 2021).

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

This study contained some limitations and delimitations that were discovered during the research and analysis. Limitations in research are unavoidable despite the hard work put forth while conducting the study (Velte & Stawinoga, 2017). The first limitation was the lack of a diverse group of participants. Eleven of the participants were Caucasian, and the other



participant was American Indian. The study might have been a bit more interesting if the experiences of instructors of different races and ethnicities had taken part. The second limitation was the study's ratio of male versus female participants. There was a total of ten female participants and two male participants in the study. The final limitation was centered on the locations of the study. This study was completed using participants from two local universities in Northeast Texas, where I reside. Local universities were chosen due to needing a reasonable commute for myself when meeting some participants face-to-face for their one-on-one interviews.

Delimitations in a research study refer to the decisions made by the researcher as to what elements are included and excluded from a study (Coker, 2022). The delimitations of this qualitative study included seeking participants who had experience teaching and designing online courses. In addition, the participants had to be course instructors currently employed at one of the universities utilized for the data collection. Finally, I chose to complete a phenomenological study to understand and share the personal experiences of each participant pertaining to the same phenomenon.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

In consideration of the limitations and delimitations described in my study, I feel this subject could be further explored. With most of the research participants being Caucasian, a researcher could utilize a more diverse group of participants yielding different results. A larger geographical area should be incorporated into future research as this study was limited to two local universities in Northeast Texas. I feel observations of a hybrid course would provide an interesting point of view to the study. The observations I completed were strictly for online courses with no comparison to how the participants conducted their face-to-face classes. Another

recommendation would be for other researchers to attend a synchronous course meeting in an online course; I could only complete asynchronous observations in most courses. Therefore, any synchronous observations will allow researchers to see how the instructors connect with the students and witness collaboration between their peers.

### **Conclusion**

This transcendental phenomenological study was focused on the exploration of college instructors' experiences in designing online courses for student learning opportunities. The theoretical framework guiding this study was the e-learning theory by Mayer et al. (2016). The e-learning theory was utilized to answer the one central research question and three sub-research questions of the study. A total of twelve college instructors from two local universities in Northeast Texas were purposefully selected for participation in this research study. Each participant described their experiences in designing online college courses at their university.

Data analysis and synthesis followed Moustakas' (1994) approach to data analysis procedures. A total of three themes and eight sub-themes emerged during data analysis. The three themes were instructional design, socialization, and effectiveness of online learning. The sub-themes were lack of training, ADA compliance, Quality Matters rubric, collaborative projects, communication, benefits, engaging materials, and instructor presence. In addition, this study listed implications for policies and procedures along with limitations and delimitations.

The findings of this study suggested that instructors struggle with online course design when they are not provided with adequate training. They experienced challenges when incorporating elements to create engaging online courses intended to motivate students. Challenges experienced in the course design process can affect the performance and progress of the students working towards achieving their academic goals. Some participants worried that

students were not provided with appropriate socialization in online courses but had difficulties determining ways to add socialization aspects to the course. Nonetheless, all participants expressed their love of teaching and welcomed the challenges that came along with the course design. The participants simply wished for their students to be successful and do their best to make that happen.

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## Appendix A

### IRB Approval Letter



June 29, 2022

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1017 COLLEGE INSTRUCTOR'S EXPERIENCES IN DESIGNING ONLINE COURSES FOR STUDENT LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

Dear Sherry Birdwell, Ellen Ziegler,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

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

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

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account. If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

**Administrative Chair of Institutional Research  
Research Ethics Office**



## Appendix B

### Permission Request Forms

April 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022



Dear [REDACTED]

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I will be conducting research that I am required to complete as part of the doctoral degree. The title of my research project is College Instructor's Experiences in Designing Online Courses for Student Learning Opportunities: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach. The purpose of the study is to be provided with a better understanding of the experience college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at the [REDACTED] and I will need to be allowed to contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study. The willing participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview time and location. In addition to staff interviews, I will need to review instructional documents and observe the courses synchronously.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating in the study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating whether the request has been approved.

Sincerely,

Sherry Birdwell  
Ph.D. Candidate

July 8<sup>th</sup>, 2022

[REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED]

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I will be conducting research that I am required to complete as part of the doctoral degree. The title of my research project is College Instructor's Experiences in Designing Online Courses for Student Learning Opportunities: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach. The purpose of the study is to be provided with a better understanding of the experience college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at [REDACTED] and I will need to be allowed to contact members of your staff to invite them to participate in my research study. The willing participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview time and location. In addition to staff interviews, I will need to review instructional documents and observe the courses synchronously.

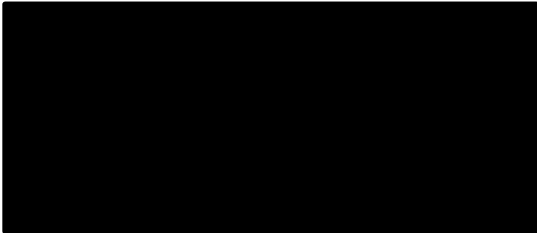
Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating in the study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating whether the request has been approved.

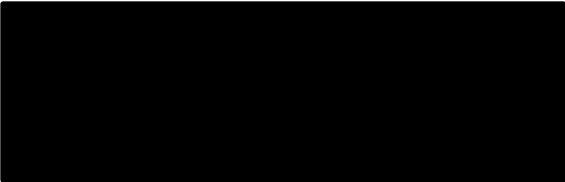
Sincerely,

Sherry Birdwell  
Ph.D. Candidate

**Appendix C**  
**Permission Approval Forms**



July 1, 2022



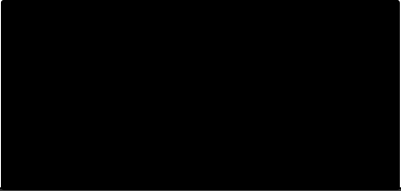
Dear Sherry Birdwell:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled College Instructor's Experiences in Designing Online Courses for Student Learning Opportunities: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach, I have decided to grant you permission to contact our faculty and invite them to participate in your study. I will need to be involved regarding student privacy and how to work around those issues.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- ☒ I grant permission for Sherry Birdwell to contact instructors who teach online and/or hybrid courses to invite them to participate in her research study.
- ☒ The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.
- ☒ We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,





July 11, 2022

Dear Sherry Birdwell:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled College Instructor's Experiences in Designing Online Courses for Student Learning Opportunities: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach. I have decided to grant you permission to reach out to our TAMUT faculty to invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ [[I/We]] will provide our membership list to Sherry Birdwell, and Sherry Birdwell may use the list to contact our members to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ X[[I/We]] grant permission for Sherry Birdwell to contact instructors who teach online and/or hybrid courses to invite them to participate in her research study.

☐ [[I/We]] will not provide potential participant information to Sherry Birdwell, but we agree to [send/provide] her study information to instructors who teach online and/or hybrid courses on her behalf.

[Please choose one.]


☐ [The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

☐ X[The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

[Retain the below option if desired.]

☐ [[I/We]] are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,



## Appendix D

### Recruitment Form

Dear Prospective Participant:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of the study is to develop a better understanding of the experiences college instructors have in creating online learning environments for student learning opportunities, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be an instructor at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] who currently teaches or has taught at least one online course that they were responsible for designing. If willing, participants will be asked to partake in an individual interview that will be audio and video recorded for accuracy, provide and allow me to review instructional documents such as textbooks, readings, lectures, and open educational resources as applicable, and allow me to observe them teaching an online or hybrid course during a synchronous class time. To ensure the accuracy of the interview transcript, participants will be asked to review the transcript to approve it. It should take approximately 2-3 hours to complete the procedures listed above. Names and other identifying information will be requested from each participant for this study, but all information gathered will remain confidential.

To participate, please contact me at sbirdwell@[REDACTED] to confirm your eligibility and schedule an interview.

A consent document is attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me prior to or at the time of your interview.

Sincerely,

Sherry Birdwell  
Ph.D. Candidate  
[REDACTED]

## Appendix E

### Consent Form

**Title of the Project:** College Instructor's Experiences in Designing Online Courses for Student Learning Opportunities: A Transcendental Phenomenological Approach

**Principal Investigator:** Sherry Birdwell, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

#### Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be an instructor at [REDACTED] who currently teaches or has taught an online course that you designed. 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 the study is to understand the experiences that college instructors face when designing online courses to facilitate learning opportunities for students at [REDACTED]

#### 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. Participate in an individual, face-to-face interview. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes to an hour and will be conducted in a private setting /or via a video conferencing platform to protect your privacy. The interview will be audio- and video-recorded using a digital voice recorder and a Samsung cell phone.
2. At the conclusion of the interview process, I will ask you to provide me with any course documents you have and allow me to review them over a period of about 7 days. The course documents such as textbooks, readings, lectures, and open educational resources as applicable, can be shared with me electronically or provided to me at the time of the interview.
3. Once I have reviewed the course documents, I will ask to observe one of the online or hybrid courses that you are currently teaching. The observation will last approximately 1-2 hours.
4. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy.

#### How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

The benefits to society include the following: by focusing on instructors' experiences in designing online courses to facilitate student learning, the study has the potential to shed light on the need for more colleges and universities to employ instructional designers.

### **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. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- All research data will be saved as password-protected files and stored on a password-locked computer. Hard copy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. The data collected may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and hard copies will be manually shredded.
- Interviews will be audio recorded using a digital recording device along with a Samsung phone and/or a video conferencing platform. Interviews will be transcribed and coded using a software program. Recordings will be saved as password-protected files and stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

### **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 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 Sherry Birdwell. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Ellen Ziegler, 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, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*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.*

<b>Your Consent</b>
---------------------

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 F**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Please introduce yourself. CQ
2. How long have you been teaching at the university? CQ
3. What are your teaching expectations pertaining to online course builds? CQ
4. Please describe the types of courses that you are currently teaching and/or designing to teach. CQ
5. What are your hopes for your students in relation to your teaching/designing methods? CQ
6. What are your thoughts about online courses and programs? SQ1
7. How many online courses have you taught in a higher education setting? CQ
8. What type of course design training have you been provided with? SQ1
9. What elements do you feel make online courses run smoothly? SQ2
10. What do you like to include in your online course design to ensure students will be successful? SQ2
11. What are the similarities you immediately noticed in socialization among students enrolled in online courses versus face-to-face courses? SQ2
12. Please describe any differences or similarities you noticed in the instructional delivery methods of online and face-to-face courses. SQ3
13. How are you able to design online courses to be engaging for the students? SQ3
14. Please describe any socialization experiences you have added to online courses that you have designed. SQ2
15. In what ways do you feel online learning would benefit students? SQ3

16. Describe your thoughts on online learning environments and if they can facilitate student learning opportunities. SQ1

## Appendix G

### Document Review Checklist

- ☐ Textbooks and other pertinent instructional materials align with the subject matter
- ☐ A course syllabus has been created and includes a course description, objectives, requirements, code of conduct, and other pertinent course elements
- ☐ Clear and measurable course learning objectives have been created and align with the instructional materials
- ☐ Clear and measurable unit learning objectives have been created and align with the instructional materials
- ☐ The determination of copyright restrictions has been completed for the instructional materials used to create the course
- ☐ Review of the multimedia content that will be added to the course
- ☐ Decisions have been made regarding the technological tools that will be used in the course
- ☐ Decisions have been made to determine the best types of assignments for the course
- ☐ Assignments have been developed and align with learning objectives
- ☐ Quizzes have been developed and align with learning objectives
- ☐ Rubrics have been developed that align with the learning objectives
- ☐ Establish expected end of course goals

## **Appendix H**

### **Observation Checklist**

- ☐ A course introduction is present to introduce the students to the course instructor
- ☐ An explanation and/or directions on how to navigate the course learning management system
- ☐ A course syllabus is present that covers the course schedule, requirements, goals, objectives, code of conduct, and other pertinent course information
- ☐ Students are provided with the instructor's email address in the event that questions or concerns arise
- ☐ Course content is designed with a consistent look and meets accessibility requirements
- ☐ Students are provided with clear and measurable course learning objectives
- ☐ Students are provided with clear and measurable unit learning objectives
- ☐ Modules are created based on the objectives of the content
- ☐ Course assignments align with the subject matter and have clear instructions included
- ☐ Collaborative and engaging activities such as discussion forums are present within the course
- ☐ Students are provided with open educational resources as needed to assist with the completion of course tasks