University of Albert

Community, Social Presence and Engagement in Online Learning

by

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Abstract

In this study, I explored how learners perceived themselves as participants in online learning activities. In following the direction established by the research question – What influences members' contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities? – I asked learners about what prompted them to make the decisions that they did while online. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach to examine learners' experiences in online learning courses, I interviewed seven mature learners who were engaged in part-time, online university studies. Our lengthy, in-depth, and recursive exchanges yielded rich data around issues of participation and group membership. In telling their stories while furthering the exploration of learners' contributions to the creating, maintaining and "living" of community, I drew on literature that has contributed to our evolving understanding of online learning through discussion of distance learning, community, social presence, and participation in online learning.

My data indicated that online learners worked hard to build and continuously negotiate community while engaged in online learning. Their devotion to harmony and equilibrium required certain levels of interactive participation from them. Learners' participation choices were formed by, and in turn formed, a type of structured, functional community. Specifically, three themes emerged: a) the functionality of learners' engagement in online learning activities; b) online community, respected but frustrating; and c) online "being" as social presence.

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Chapter One

Introduction to the Study

The recent evolution to online delivery of programs by both fledgling institutions dedicated solely to distance education and by traditional institutions opening new avenues of access to potential students has offered educators and researchers opportunities to re-examine the dynamics that define teaching and learning. This is a critical exercise if we accept that teaching-learning scenarios indeed change in response to altered learning environments. Such changed environments feature, specifically, the introduction of "virtual" learning, "virtual" interaction, and the "any time, any place" access that asynchronous learning environments provide.

The emergence of new types of virtual relationships has enlarged and stretched our understanding of the ways that we relate to each other in many facets of our daily interactions. It has changed our conception of community. New ways of existing with computer technologies, new ways of communicating through time and space, new ways of conducting all manner of business from e-commerce to romance over networked computer systems have blurred, heightened, or simply re-opened discussions on the nature and scope of social interactions that have defined our lives.

In the educational arena, specifically, we recognize now, in the 21st century, that the barriers of time, space and place in learning have fallen, giving way to the phenomenon of learners who establish invisible but interactive learning relationships with online colleagues and instructors (Gunawardena, 1995; Turkle, 1995; Wenger, 1998). The evolution to new learning situations potentially challenges the traditional relationships that have defined learners and their learning environments. If, in our learning histories, we have responded to the teacher's presence, both physically and emotionally, what do we respond to when we learn in a "virtual" environment? Who serves as our inspiration without the proximity of classmates? How do we build the learning structures that were provided for us by the familiarity of bricks-and-mortar? The hallmarks of online learning are flexibility and convenience; the attractiveness of "any time, any place" learning has contributed to the growth of virtual learning environments (Burge, 1994).

In turn, new virtual learning environments have changed the functionality of aspects of the previously well-understood roles that comprise our learning interactions. While classrooms and educational institutions were constructed to bring people together in established patterns for learning, new technologies permit – in fact, encourage – learning while people are apart, separated by dimensions of both time and space. In the virtual environment, how do learners interact with each other during their learning experiences? What kinds of choices do online learners make to accommodate their group members? How, in fact, do they exercise their social presence as members of a learning group? What types of relationships do online learners establish with their learning groups? How do they feel about their presence in this type of learning environment, and how do they contribute or respond to the mechanisms that shape it? What prompts them to act at all?

As an adult educator, teacher, administrator, online facilitator, and researcher, I am also always a learner. My own online experiences have shown me that communication with others is integral to learning, and the questions that learners' adaptations to online learning venues raise intrigue me both as a researcher and as an educator.

My work life affords me many opportunities to interact with learners and with online learning processes, including those of course design, implementation, learner support, and evaluation. Officially, and less officially – in casual conversations with adult learners in the program I administer – I hear learners' stories of their online experiences. They speak as much about the intricacies of online co-existence with their groups as they do about what they are actually learning from course content. In my various roles, I witness the virtual group jostling that accompanies the start of courses; I hear stories of in-course struggles – with technology, with instructors, with each other – and then, as the courses finish, I receive further feedback from learners and instructors through the evaluation processes.

Online learning is a form of distance education where learners and instructors, usually separate from each other, communicate using computer-mediated communication. It falls within the rubric of distance education – the most recent innovation in a long evolution of learning methodologies that has been defined by Moore (1973) as

> the family of instructional methods in which the teaching behaviours are executed apart from the learning behaviours . . . so that communication between the teacher and the learner must be facilitated by print, electronic, mechanical or other devices. (p. 3)

With access to the Internet forming an integral part of the connective process, online learning can provide opportunities for both synchronous and asynchronous communication among learners and between learners and instructor. There are many delivery models, but the asynchronous environment that this study's learners used offered learners unlimited access to large volumes of information via the Internet, course materials that were both web and print-based, and communications fora that were housed within the WebCT software.

Do these new delivery formats alter the nature of interaction and participation? Early distance education models were developed around the axes of autonomy, control, responsibility and dependence/independence (Daniel & Marquis, 1979; Garrison, 1989; Moore, 1989) as researchers attempted to define relationships among learner, teacher, and content when distance intervened. More recent literature, moving beyond the functionality of interaction to address the quality of online learning experiences, draws on social learning theory and constructivist theory to focus specifically on the outcomes of group interaction, group dynamics and the broadly-accepted understanding of the importance of group cohesiveness, or community, to successful online learning outcomes (Gunawardena, 1995; Jonassen, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Studies that question the role of community in the learning process have contributed to my interest in understanding the locus of learners' perceptions of the building, maintaining and "living" of community as manifested by the nature of their contributions to online activity.

The Purpose of the Study and Research Question

The purpose of this research was to explore with adult learners engaged in online learning experiences how they established relationships with others in their courses, what aspects of their learning experiences influenced their participation decisions and their interactions with others in the group, and the ways in which their participation and the reactions of others to their participation affected their online activities.

The study took its direction from this overarching question: *What influences members' contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities?* This broad question contained these more focused sub-questions:

1. What influences interactions among members of an online group?

2. What affects members while they are engaged in online learning?
3. What does it mean to be a member of an online group?
4. How do members of an online group understand the term "community"?

The Significance of the Study

This study's significance relates to its place in our understanding of online community. It provides further information on the nature of online learners' sense of community, it sheds light on the types of communicative skills that are demonstrated in learning online, and it contributes to the understanding of learners' patterns of decision-making and participation during their engagement in online learning. Because of its interpretive orientation, the study's findings document and provide understanding and insight concerning what individuals do in situations requiring their interaction with and participation in online learning in similar environments.

Professional significance

As an educator in the continuing education world and immersed in online learning, I am surrounded daily by learners' responses to the online medium. Through their eyes, I relive Usher and Edwards' (1998) excitement about the potential of impending change that they captured from an academic perspective:

> One effect of the use of these technologies, particularly in the accompanying development of "cyberspace," is that canons and authorities are seriously undermined by the electronic nature of texts . . . Knowledge that is not only commodified but decentred functions in an environment where epistemological boundary making is not so potent. (p. 1)

The notion of community counters some of the prevailing ideas of ownership, control, and design of learning environments. The data from this study contribute to this growing body of research by exploring the experiences of distance learners as they grapple with some of their "boundaries."

Personal significance

I have learned and taught online. To my "toolkit," I have added the insights that this study has provided into what others do in similar situations, knowing full well that what John does in his learning repertoire is not necessarily what Della does, nor what Mavis *might* do in a similar situation, but also realizing that "the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense" (Elbaz, quoted in Carter, p. 7) can be well-sketched through thoughtful interpretation to help make sense of our situations, our cultures, and our lives.

My Personal Interest in the Study

By the time one is immersed in the doctoral adventure, it must be fairly obvious that learning – being a learner – has somehow become an important part of life. And for me it is equally true that experience influences what we see and how we come to learn. Therefore, I want to share with you my background which I bring to this study.

Always a good student, I found both success and satisfaction in learning. My literary abilities flourished; I wrote – letters, poetry, stories, a newspaper column. I edited the high school yearbook. It was no surprise, then, that I should eventually find myself teaching writing and communication skills, among other things, to college students.

Even before I entered graduate school in 1988, I had begun to work in distance education, completing a university program via teleconferencing, a popular distance format in Alberta at the time. My master's thesis, which examined distance learners' perceptions of student support services available to them, grew in part out of my own experience as a distance learner, the sole participant at my particular site. Several years later, now employed at the university, I found myself on the other end of the audio-teleconferencing microphone, teaching courses in adult education, in addition to managing and administering a distance education program. My immersion in distance education was becoming more multi-faceted and I, in turn, became more curious about the experiences of those students whose lives I was entering, if only by voice. I wondered what they were actually doing wherever they were located while they listened to my voice, what prompted them to interject when they did, and what the effects of their fellow learners' offerings had on their own actions.

At that time, computer conferencing was becoming popular and it became evident that it was going to become the format of choice due to the ease of access made possible by its asynchronicity. In my corner of the educational world – continuing professional education – it quickly became clear that, as in the worlds of industry, business, entertainment and commerce, the introduction of the Internet's virtual reality was going to change the nature of distance learning as we had come to know it (De Kerckhove, 1997; Gackenbach, 1998; Turkle, 1995). My historical interest in and familiarity with distance education as learner, instructor, and researcher was now heightened by the arrival of the most exciting technology since the advent of the telegraph (Standage, 1998), the 19th century innovation that "redefined forever our attitudes towards new technologies" (p. 211).

Overview of the Study

In this brief introductory chapter, I describe the evolution of my interest in the research question historically and thematically. The focus of my research fits first into the larger realm of distance education and then, more specifically, within the area of online learning that occupies my both my worklife and my academic interest. I present the research questions and outline the contributions of this research to further our understanding of learners' engagement in online learning.

Chapter Two comprises a review of the literature that underpins and frames this study. I address relevant literature in the areas of distance and online education, social presence, community, participation and interaction. The literature review highlights not only research that presaged and contributed to the development of this study but also indicates methodological concerns and reports research studies whose conclusions call for further exploration into topics addressed in this study.

Chapter Three presents the methodology by which the data were gathered. To hear the stories of participants' experiences while learning online, I used an interpretive, qualitative framework. I worked with the data recursively, returning to both participants' words and participants to pull thematic meaning from their interview transcripts.

Chapter Four displays the results of the study and highlights descriptions that the learners gave me. Beginning with an introduction of each of the participants, I then describe the data under the three major areas into which I organized the data: pressures on learners engaging in online learning; learners' sense of social presence, community, and etiquette while online; and the importance of the instructional role in learners' online activities. I then revisit the data through the major themes identified through this analysis:

a) the functionality of learners' engagement in online learning activities; b) online community, respected yet frustrating; c) online "being" as social presence.

In Chapter Five, I discus my analysis of the findings through a number of lenses that focus on the nature of online learning experiences. To this end, I consider the results of my study in light of some of the traditional models that have been used to understand distance education; I examine the unique nature of online community as compared to the character of other Internet communities; and I consider the negotiation, maintenance and idiosyncrasies – conflict, silence, etiquette – of living within online learning communities.

In the last chapter, Chapter Six, I present an overview and summary of the study and questions for future research and practice. A final section on my reflections attempts to locate the research experience of having done the study within my professional practice and to describe the effect of the study's findings on my work as researcher, teacher, and administrator, and learner.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

A number of concepts contribute to the theoretical underpinnings of my study. Within the "collaborative shared world of the educational setting" (Garrison & Archer, 2000), I have focussed on social presence, community, social presence, participation, interaction, and collaboration in online learning.

I see the first four concepts as interconnected in that within a constructivist orientation, social presence is the concept central to learning and it requires not only community, with its constituent participation and interaction, but also collaboration, a form of participation that is closely connected to constructivist learning principles. Hence I have addressed them in this order. I begin with an initial discussion to place online learning in its broader distance and adult education contexts.

Online Learning: Connections to Distance and Adult Education

Borrowing from the work of Moore (1989) and Nipper (1989), Garrison's (1989) sketch of the history of distance education included an early model of its component parts. In that model, learners' responsibilities were understood to be balanced against the parallel concepts of control and independence (Garrison, 1989; Holmberg, 1989). Those definitions of distance education were based on the separation of learner from instructor and required, therefore, the inclusion of technologies to mediate their communication. Early literature focussed on the integration of those technological methodologies into the learning dynamic (Bates, 1995; Laurillard, 1993; Mason & Kaye, 1989) and looked at the role of technologies in learning with an eye to enriching the new "two-way communication" that sat at the heart of interactive distance technologies. Garrison and Shale (1990) emphasized this point when they stated that "it is the extent to which two-way communication is provided that reflects the responsiveness to the learner's needs and therefore the quality of the educational program" (p. 35). The discourse continued to include studies of measurement that ascertained that learning was indeed occurring in the new distance formats (Russell, 1997).

Recent distance education research has now refocussed the discussion on of the use of asynchronous conferencing and its social activity. Increasingly, the literature spans a number of disciplines that include education, management, sociology, psychology and the sciences. This focus on the phenomena of learner identity and the creation of community among online learners (Bitterman, 2000; Gackenbach, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Ruhleder, 1999; Stacey, 1999; Woodruff, 1998) reflects an understanding of learning as a complex social activity. The discussion encompasses the actions of participation, collaboration, and interaction, all of which give rise to learner-centred curiosities and reflect the type of constructivist inquiry that drove the research for this study.

Investigation into the dynamics of online learning in educational settings followed hand-in-hand with broader research that sought to understand the evolving phenomenon of a growing Internet culture not only in Western society but also beyond (de Kerckhove, 1997; Turkle, 1995; Rheingold, 1993). In exploring the amalgam of characteristics that promoted successful online learning experiences, early adopters found that constructivist theory complemented what was already held to be true of adult learning (Jonassen, 1992). Echoing Vygotsky and Leont'ev, Jonassen (2000) reiterated the inseparability of learning from social activity and emphasized the anchoring of knowledge in context as being fundamental to the social negotiation and co-construction of knowledge (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Jonassen, 1992; Jonassen, 2000).

More recently, Garrison and Archer (2000) expanded their model of online learning into a broad adult-education oriented framework. Using the work of Dewey and Rogers to underpin their discussion of online learning, Garrison and Archer (2000) presented an "ideal" adult learning situation constructed through critical reflection, following Schön (1987), that reiterated the body of literature that is broadly accepted as descriptive of adult learners (Apps, 1991; Cross, 1980; Knowles, 1980; Mackeracher, 1996). Garrison and Archer's (2000) framework comprises the following assumptions: adult learners bring rich life experience to their learning and are eager to share their stories; adult learners assume learners' roles responsibly; adult learners "have, or can acquire, a capacity for critical thinking" (p. 4); adult learners' purposeful motivation facilitates some level of self-management.

Social Presence in the Online Learning Context

The recent literature on online learning environments addresses successful learning experiences in terms of community, culture, collaboration, and constructivism (Brown, 2001; Bullen, 1998; Gunawardena, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Together they form the rubric of social presence, defined as "the salience of the other in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions" (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976, p. 65).

Learners' social presence – their co-existence and interactions as social beings while learning – is grounded in their experience both within and outside of their learning

(Wenger, 1998). Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) development of a tripartite model based on components of Garrison's original distance education studies is useful in its explanation of the importance of social presence as a critical element to the notion of how people learn. In so doing, the model attempts to reconcile the various dimensions of the learning process that had, until recently, been described as separate entities (Burge, 1994).

Garrison and Archer's (2000) model presents the learning experience in terms of three "presence" components: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence. Cognitive presence refers to how learners attend to knowledge creation in their learning. Teaching presence concerns the teaching behaviours and related roles of members of the group. Generally, teaching behaviour is understood to be a function of the appointed instructor; however, student members of the learning group can also be charged with teaching presence responsibilities during a course. Social presence is defined as "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a *community of enquiry* [author's italics]" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999, p. 50). Garrison and Archer (2000) label the entirety of the learning process, including cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence, as a "community of enquiry" (Garrison & Archer, 2000). Within this dynamic, a sense of "community," or groupness, builds from the interconnectedness of the group (Brown, 2001; Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Eastmond, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999), although in differing ways and to varying degrees. In this study, the term "community of enquiry" refers to Garrison and Archer's definition of learning environment and is used separately from the term "community."

Within the social presence dimension of their tripartite model, Garrison and Archer (2000) further identified aspects contributing to social presence – emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Within these categories, using research based on the application of the social presence model, they list many other behaviours that reflect group membership: humour; self-disclosure; expressions of emotion; reciprocal and respectful exchanges; mutual awareness in attending to the contributions of others; levels and type of contact; recognition of others' ideas; agreement, acceptance, and complimenting others on their ideas; and establishing and contributing to a sense of group cohesion (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Garrison et al., 2000a). Focusing on learners' experiences in computer-conferenced learning environments, Burge (1994) detailed similar behaviours in categorizing learners' cognitive processes and skills.

The history of "presence," however, draws on sources both wider and deeper than the educational considerations that are presented here. Modern communications scholars, for example, have been wrestling with the notion of presence for decades, attempting since the advent of television and electronic mass media to understand the integral relationships of viewers/participants to the medium (de Kerckhove, 1997; McLuhan, 1970; Nostbakken, 1980). For example, Schweir (2000) presents a perspective that downplays the power of learners' social presence in allocating primary control of the online learning environment to course designers. In emphasizing that online learning materials' design features can in themselves foster learning cultures, Schweir attributes qualities of objectivity and separateness to the online environment and to its learners. However, Garrison and Archer (2000) warn that too much emphasis on design can also contribute to "an over-emphasis on the packaging and delivery of content and an under-emphasis on teaching" (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p. 123) and other evolving interactive processes.

Lombard and Ditton (1997) place social presence among six identifiable types of presence that also serve as descriptors for explaining viewer/participants' relationships with media. In emphasizing, like McLuhan, the relationship of participants to the medium and the resultant social complexity of interaction, Lombard and Ditton (1997) take a constructivist position that supports social presence through learners' rhythms of participation. While other aspects of the learning transaction, for example, "information richness," can be more easily measured objectively and fit into quantitative assessment instruments (Garrison et al., 2000a; Rourke et al., 1999), coming to understand learners' perspectives of their social landscapes requires a richer qualitative interpretation.

Methodological issues

The advent of asynchronous computer conferencing has facilitated the collection of data that investigates social presence. Using web-based, text-based communications software such as First Class and WebCT has allowed researchers access to verbatim recordings of online learning interactions. Given these sources of data, transcript analysis has emerged as an important data analysis technique in measuring types of activities within online courses (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Rourke et al., 1999). The analysis of computer conferencing transcripts has contributed both techniques and tools for quantitative understandings of online social activity (Rourke et al., 1999) as well as refining the notion of social presence (Garrison et al., 2000a).

Within the complex social dynamic that fosters, co-creates and houses learning (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Jonassen, 2000; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Wenger, 1998), however, measures of quantitative occurrence do "not reveal much about the process that will facilitate worthwhile outcomes" (Garrison et al., 2000a, p. 13). Much of the measurement and model-building literature to date concludes with calls for further investigation into the complex processes that characterize online social presence (Bullen, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Discovering the process and the triggers that facilitate "worthwhile outcomes" and meaningful learning experiences for students has driven the research in my study. This study's findings should complement the typologies of social presence that already exist.

Community in Online Learning: Definition, Agency, Role

The term "community" has in the past referred to a place-based concept with rural connotations. The *Dictionary of Sociology* (1994) identified three elements as usually being present, either singly or in combination, in our understanding of the term "community": a) a collection of people with a particular social structure, b) a sense of belonging or community "spirit," and c) a self-containment of sorts – once geographical (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1994, p. 75). Over the years, however, and especially with the advent of out-of-time, out-of-space virtual connectivity, community has become an increasingly difficult term to define (Abercrombie et al., 1994; Wilson, 2001).

Our sense of community in our flexible, transient, modern society is often not geographically-based but relationship-based (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997) as like-minded groups of people share goals or special occasions. Community may or may not have a physical dimension to it. For that reason, social network analysis, for example, when measuring the relationships within which we interact or to which we relate the most frequently, yields questionable results when "frequency of contact" is interpreted as community (Garton et al., 1997).

Traditional classrooms contained the makings of "community" by bringing together into a physical space a group of people who shared goals. Their existence for a limited amount of time in a given time period created a behavioural pattern for its members, governed by rhythms and sets of dynamics, not the least of which was the physical presence of an instructor that is associated, even for adults, with issues of power, control, and even punishment (Anderson et al., 2001; Cross, 1981; Renner, 1993; Wlodkowski, 1999).

The literature presents various views of the question of agency in the creation of community (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Kowach & Schwier, 1997; Schwier, 2000; Wilson, 2001). It is assumed by some that, as educators, we are able "to "evolve" community "through nurturing conditions" (Schwier, 2000, p. 6) and by creating "highly interactive, loosely-structured organizations with tightly knit relations based on personal persuasion and interdependence" (Kowach & Schwier, 1997, p. 2). For Garrison and Archer (2000), the belief that community can be initiated through course design leads them to caution against emphasizing "packaging" over the effective teaching and assessment processes. In the same vein, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000) remind us that "learning through a collaborative process cannot be forced upon or induced through outside forces; it has to be internally created, mutually accepted as valid and valuable, and enacted by students and instructors."

Learners' sense of online community is integral to the concept of social presence (Fabro & Garrison, 1998; Jonassen, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wenger, 1998). Online community facilitates the development of "a sense of group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit" (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 76) and helps group members promote a shared appreciation of space and purpose.

Communities of learners

Social learning theories that integrate notions of learner cognition, instruction, and social presence describe online activity as a "community of enquiry" (Garrison et al., 2000a) or "community of practice" (Wenger, 1998) or "community of learners" (Brown, 2001; Wegerif, 1998). Wenger's (1998) model defined communities of practice as "habitable ways of life . . . practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories" (p. 6) that people engage in as members of the societal groups of which they are a part. In this view, learning is perceived as a social activity where learners are "active participants in the practices of social communities and [are] constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p. 4). Wenger's notion of relativity within the learning community is key. Brown's (2001) community of learners "meant a group of people with a 'shared purpose, good communication, and a climate with justice, discipline, caring, and occasions for celebration'" (p. 20). Similarly, Wilson attributes the following characteristics to the sense of community among learners: belonging, trust, expected learning, and obligation (2001).

Wenger's communities of practice concept (1998) is clearly a meta-construct that includes

> the language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specified criteria, codified procedures, regulations, and contracts . . . all the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understanding, underlying assumptions, and shared world views. (p. 47)

Wenger's strongly articulated sense of community, central to his social theory of learning that views learning as a function of and about social formations, is shared by other social constructivist thinkers (Vygotsky, 1978; Jonassen, 2000). His discussion of community reiterates the premise that our engagement in social practice is at the heart of the learning enterprise, a notion supported by Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000). Similarly, Stacey (1999) concluded that conceptually attempting to separate online groups' efforts to construct social knowledge from their collaborative social behaviours was "in some ways artificial, as the socio-affective support environment was an essential element in the social construction of learning" (p. 11).

In the same vein, Wegerif (1998) emphasized the social ambience of learning as "becoming part of a community of practice" in describing the movements of learners from being "outsiders" in a group to becoming "insiders" through increased levels of comfort, familiarity, and inclusion. At the same time, St. Clair (1998) recognizes that "community relationships of both the learners and the educator are essential supports to their identity and the difference between the perspectives embedded in these relationships do not need to be treated as problems to be solved" (p. 11).

The engagement, therefore, of learners encompasses more than the sum of the physicality of any of the dimensions of which they are a part (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Jonassen, 2000; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Woodruff, 1999). Physical space, time space, emotional space, cognitive space are all grist for the mill of interactivity that drives the learning space. And while it is widely acknowledged (Garrison et al., 2000a; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wenger, 1998) that each of these elements is inextricably bound to the others, and that a study of one impacts the study of another, this study focussed on the dynamics of learner interaction and participation through their engagement in learning activities.

Methodological issues

Researchers searching to ascertain the existence of communities of practice or communities of inquiry in learning have developed tools and data collection instruments to be able to measure the presence of Wenger's constituent parts. These studies are mostly quantitative in nature and focus on counting and categorizing types of learners' responses (Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Rourke at al., 1999). Some, such as Burge (1994), Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000) and Stacey (1999), have used qualitative approaches. Wenger's curiosity about learners' online identity, experiences, and practice is echoed in the research question that prompted this study:

> What does look promising are inventive ways of engaging students in meaningful practices, of providing access to resources that enhance their participation, of opening their horizons . . . of involving them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value. (Wenger, 1998, p. 10)

Participation: Collaboration, interaction, and response

In the business of learning at a distance, active participation in the learning at hand is one of the jobs of the learner, so much so that participation is often encouraged and stipulated through the awarding of participation marks. Such participation manifests itself in various types of interactions that have been categorized in the literature in light of their relationships to the other elements of the teaching-learning dynamic: instructor, learners, content, task, learner autonomy, power and control (Anderson & Garrison, 1998; Garrison, 1989; Moore, 1989; Wagner, 1997). The notion of participation is integral to understanding online learning contexts.

The terms used to describe participatory behaviours of learners engaging in online learning are often used interchangeably or loosely. Although the education literature does not make careful distinction among these terms, they can be separated from each other, interaction and response being a subset of the larger term "collaboration," which, from the Latin, means "to labour together." In the process of working together, collaborators must interact and respond to each other. As such, collaboration is a key concept in both adult education and constructivist literatures (Gunawardena, 1995; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Wegerif, 1998).

The literature of communications, on the other hand, speaks quite pointedly to the issue of interaction and separates it into several types – face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction, and quasi-mediated interaction (Thompson, 1995) – that are analyzed with an eye to understanding the impact of each type of interaction on social control and communication processes. What is important in this work are the numerous affirmations of the interplay between creation of social presence and the process of interaction

(Boden, 1995; Thompson, 1995; Wenger, 1998), and the recognition that new forms of interaction, in this case mediated communication, have altered the ways in which we have previously related to each other: "It has, we could say, altered the 'interaction mix' of social life. ...The creation and renewal of traditions are processes that become increasingly bound up with mediated symbolic exchange" (Thompson, 1995, p. 37).

Following the constructivist view, the processes of interaction, collaboration and response contribute to the meaningful construction of knowledge that surpasses the exchange or the passing of knowledge from one entity to another (Jonassen, 2000). While the importance of interaction and collaborative behaviours in the knowledge-building process is well documented, the language used to describe them varies throughout the literature. Schrage (1995) defined the act of collaboration as "an act of shared creation and/or shared discovery"(p. 4). Garrison (1991) developed a model in which he identified sharing/comparing, dissonance, negotiation, co-construction, testing, and application as the key phases. Logically, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000a) credited social presence with making the difference between achieving the constructivist ideal of a "collaborative community of inquiry" (p. 15) and the more basic function of simply passing on information. For them, collaboration in learning entailed "an approach to learning that goes beyond simple interaction and declarative instruction" (p. 13).

In their model of collaborative learning, Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb (2000) propose a Habermasian orientation based on a theoretical perspective that proposes that the "success of a collaborative learning process can be conceptualized as the degree of satisfaction of ideal learning conditions." They identify two dimensions for analyzing collaborative learning situations – knowledge domains of linguistic acts and learners' dominant orientations to learning and self. Although the two concepts are interrelated in Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb's (2000) model of communication, it is the second concept which best fits the direction of my study through its allusion to learners' sense of social presence. Cecez-Kecmanovic and Webb's (2000) work suggests that the dimension of "satisfied self" is critical to successful learning and that the provision only of "technologically-advanced environments" and of instruction "about the task, purpose of group work and norms of behaviour" does not ensure that collaborative learning will occur.

In an international online debate, Gunawardena (1997) also highlighted some of the issues inherent in the discussion of interaction and collaboration in online learning. In her extensive writings on collaborative learning, she (1997, 1995, 1991) distinguished collaborative learning from learning that takes place through information transaction, such as learning how to fix a car by reading its instruction manual. Her distinctions echo those of Bereiter (1992) who separated declarative knowledge from procedural knowledge and found that those basic levels of knowledge did not contribute to the building of higher-level concepts. Idea-based, epistemic learning "is dependent upon social interaction mediated through language and culture" (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p. 43). Similarly, Gundawardena (1995) asserted that "in order for an educational transaction to take place there must be interaction and feedback." Without using the word "collaboration," Gunawardena, in a segment of that same debate entitled "No Interaction, No Education," drew heavily on the constructivist stance of knowledge co-creation, thus reinforcing the tacit implication in this discussion that learner/ instructor and learner/ learner interactions are actually collaborations that are "essential for knowledge construction."

As a footnote to the nuance of terminology in this discussion, Kearsley, himself a noted distance educator and a participant in the debate, suggested that it was "not interaction that matters but responsiveness"; in rebuttal, Gunawardena pointed out that response was itself an interactive function.

There is also a plethora of "how-to" literature, written to aid those who are approaching teaching online with anxiety. As educators whose assumed objectives are to encourage meaningful, higher-level learning and shared learning experiences among group members, we know what it is we are supposed to do (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). To this end, Ekhaml (1999) presented a number of activities such as online debate, online peer evaluation, case studies, guest speakers, and bulletin boards as strategic methodologies for fostering participation, concluding that

> collaborative learning increases students' motivation levels, eliminates their sense of isolation in online learning, and enhances the entire atmosphere of the online community. Just as there is no best medium or best instructional technique, there is no best way for establishing interactions in online distance learning. (p. 4)

Similarly, studies have examined various types of interaction among learners at a distance (Smith, Sipusic & Pannoni, 1999; Sorensen, 1999; Stahl, 1999). Smith, Sipusic and Pannoni also compared results, as manifested by grades, to results from same-course face-to-face learning, concluding that learners in tutored, distance learning environments out-performed students in traditional lectures. More pertinent to this study, the authors alluded to their focus on "explicit, observable communications breakdowns" (p. 564), and suggested that further research on the disruption of group cohesion and "other social aspects of collaborative discourse deserves more study" (p. 564). In particular, they noted that their study was done with learners in relative quiet and seclusion; they wondered whether, in "every day" distance learning environments, "the distractions of office or home life might diminish one's ability and willingness to attend to the group" (p. 564). None of these studies reported on learners' sense of their own social presence or patterns of interaction. And Stahl, although cognizant of the interrelationship of collaborative practice with social practice, concluded his study with a further call for the design of new software as the avenue for accommodating the twin developments of culture and technology.

Another common way of addressing interaction focusses on the notion of support that learners derive from engaging with their peers, a recognized outcome and often design-embedded goal of online learning activities (Parker, 1999; Yeoman, 1995). Yeoman's study of "Sam's Café" outlined the evolution of a "more personal and less elaborate tone" (p. 215) of online dialogue as participants became more comfortable with each other. Parker traced increased social interaction to increased motivation among learners; other outcomes were higher academic recall and more positive attitudes. Brown (2001) attributed increased online socialization with long-term association of group members, but her definition of long-term is unclear, and I took the study to have encompassed only one academic year. Angeli, Bonk, and Hara (1998), on the other hand, attributed a decline in purely social interactions to the fact that participants had come to know each other better and had settled into "old shoe" types of relationships. In recognition of the strong correlation between learning and social presence, there have been widespread calls for closer examinations of "functional and social factors" within learning exchanges (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 164).

In work that exhibited a more technical bent in its attempt to understand online learning, Campos, Laferrière, and Harasim (2001) articulated the demands of the emerging knowledge society as requiring a process of "intertwining practice and pedagogical ideas through networking," and Wagner (1997) examined closely the nature of "interactivity" – a term she defined as "the attributes of the technology systems employed in distance learning enterprises" (p. 20). She then developed a framework of 12 types of interactions that elaborated on the three basic types of interactions previously described by Moore (1989): learner-learner; learner-instructor; and learner-content. Wagner's concluding call for good design in distance learning practice complements educators' understanding that pedagogically-sound design is essential for learner success (Conrad & Kanuka, 1999; Garrison & Archer, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). To further understand the online choices that learners make in their learning activities, this study asked why do learners choose to increase their participation at certain times? Why do they elect to share some information with some of the others but not all of the others?

It was my intention that the stories of learners would answer some of the questions that remain in the charting of online domains. Kanuka and Anderson (1998) acknowledged clearly these issues in their analysis of an online forum conducted through surveys, interviews and transcript analysis, when they stated:

> This study . . . examined only the externally revealed thinking and assumes that the postings are a reflection of the internal thinking that occurs. We acknowledge that there is much additional internal processing that is not documented in this study. (p. 68)

It marks yet perhaps another level of assumption to suppose that we can gain insight into learners' internal processes simply by asking them. This study made that assumption, however.

Methodological issues

Using an interpretive approach, Vrasidas and McIssac (2000) sought to "uncover the factors that influenced interaction" (p. 62) in a university graduate course. Asserting the complexity and connectivity of factors affecting interaction, the authors drew upon major literature sources (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Gunawardena, 1995; Moore, 1989) and identified learner control (Garrison & Baynton, 1987) as "central to the notion of interaction" (Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000, p. 63). Course structure, class size, feedback and familiarity with technology were named as factors influencing participation. While the authors concluded with a call for further research and admitted to only having "scratched the surface of the complex construct we call interaction" (Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000, pp. 70-71), their study mixed face-to-face and online components that blurred their outcomes in a number of ways.

Vrasidas and McIsaac (2000) used Web-based communication initially only to supplement five weeks of face-to-face instruction; after that, face-to-face instruction was interspersed with online instruction. Eight group discussions were scheduled during the course – only four of them online. Student response was mandated and structured, reflecting students' use of the online medium as peripheral. The maximum number of students' postings in one week was 10. The results of this study raise questions around the paradox contained within the notions of engagement and community. How do learners value community when they able to access group members face-to-face? Does course design, integrating occasions for face-to-face meetings, assume certain levels of discussion?

A number of studies present quantitative measurements of learners' performance in online learning environments (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Hewitt & Teplovs, 1999; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). Other researchers have studied online interactivity as measured by responses, indications of critical thinking, and the social presence factors outlined above. Inherent methodological difficulties in the analysis of transcripts, acceptable levels of reliability, and difficulties in inter-rater reliability among coders rendered difficult the conclusions from these studies (Bullen, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Rourke et al., 1999) that attempted quantitatively to correlate the number of instances of identifiable social presence factors –for example, emoticons – with a designation of "success" in online learning endeavours. Did the manifestation of more interaction and participation in Group A compared to Group B mean that they learned more? Did it mean that they enjoyed each other's presence more? Did it mean that one group had better social skills than another group? Or did it simply mean that a group of more naturally vociferous learners congregated at the same time in the same place? Interpretation of manifest communication is difficult. As Rourke at al. (1999) pointed out: "Discourse in a community of inquiry is not equivalent to social interaction over the garden fence or a bar at a neighbourhood pub" (p. 67). Online discourse remains, however, to be qualitatively understood in the way that we have come to know other forms of communication.

Hewitt and Teplovs (1999), in an examination of computer-mediated communication's threaded discussions that illustrated the difficulty in seeking understanding of the learning process through numbers, concluded that until a conference ends, "the status of all threads is uncertain" (p. 240). That is, a thread – a stream of discussion – can appear to be dead, and then magically revive with a spurt of additional input from learners. Their conclusion included the admission that the development of "dynamic, adaptive algorithms that continually tailor the growth probabilities to the conditions of the course and the behavior of the participants" (p. 240) is essential in coming to better comprehend what actually transpires behind the evolution of threads in CMC (Blanchette, 2001b). Curtis and Lawson (2001), after measuring their online exchanges, concluded, somewhat understatedly, that they "found no evidence of off-task activity among students" (p. 32) and quoted other research findings that labelled students' "social acknowledgements" as "unproductive" (p. 32).

The Uniqueness of the Online Learning Environment

Some literature (Brown, 2001; Schwier, 2001) does not distinguish between the nature of interaction in online learning communities as compared to other virtual communities, an oversight which I think tends to negate a major difference between the two types of virtual experiences. Rheingold (1993) hinted at the character of virtual Internet connections when he described virtual communities as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 9). The implicit condition under Rheingold's words is purpose, which is the caveat attached to Internet relationships in other studies of virtual communities (Jacobson, 2001; Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999).

De Kerckhove (1997) said this about life on the Net:

> There is no horizon on the Net, only expansions and contractions, and our relationship to it begins with a formidable expansion of psychological size. The loss of a clear sense of boundaries, the expansion of our mental frameworks by satellite, the on-line redistribution of our powers of action, all of this adds up to a confused body image. We can't be absolutely sure anymore where we begin and where we end. (p. 38)

However dramatic, de Kerckhove's distinction highlights this study's interest in online learners' sense of self: online learning does not permit (or encourage) learners to leave their senses of self behind. The "disinhibition" (Wallace, 1999, p. 9) of the Internet does not represent the behaviours of online learners and online interaction in learning communities has been shown to end when the course ended (Brown, 2001).

Studies detailing online learners' perceptions of learning from the cognitive perspective also address their sense of themselves – their proprietorship of themselves – in their awareness of the bargain-making that Burge (1994) describes, in Postman's words, as "what the technology gave and what it took away." In this regard, issues of time were both positively and negatively rated – positively for the flexibility and reflection time possible, and negatively for the unyielding demands of online learning on learners' lives and schedules.

Summary

In this review of the literature, I attempted to captured the "how" and "why" of my proposed research by highlighting relevant work from, specifically, literatures related to communities of practice, social presence in online learning, and collaboration, interaction and response.

I examined online learning in light of learners' presence as members of a community, highlighting recent work that emphasized the importance of understanding learning as a social activity. Particular emphasis on learners' engagement stressed the complex interplay of their cognitive, social, and instructional roles. The research cited, while fleshing out the context of my study, left my central question unanswered: What shapes learners' participation in and contributions to their learning activities? How do learners "experience" being a member of such a group? By asking learners these questions, I sought to determine how they saw themselves as members of an online community as they chose to – or chose not to – participate in online learning activities.

Chapter 3

Methodology

In this study, I asked the participants to relate stories of their online learning experiences in response to the central question: *What influences members' contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities?* This broad question invited a number of more focused but contributive queries:

1. What influences interactions among members of an online group?
2. What affects members while they are engaged in online learning?
3. What does it mean to be a member of an online group?
4. How do members of an online group understand the term "community"?

As Glesne and Peshkin (1992) pointed out, " people tend to adhere to the methodology that is most consonant with their socialized world view. . . . We are attracted to and shape research problems that match our personal view of seeing and understanding the world" (p. 9). For me, that personal view was tied to the social construction of knowledge through communication and social interaction. It was linked to Geertz's reflections on how the questioning anthropological world could make sense out of its observations, when he noted that inquiry

> calls for showing how particular events and unique occasions, an encounter here, a development there, can be woven together with a variety of facts and a battery of interpretations to produce a sense of how things go, have been going, and are likely to go. (Geertz, quoted in Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 6)

Bateson remarked that "Life is not made up of separate pieces" (p. 108), alluding both to the connectedness of life's events and to the process of making sense of those events through reflection and writing. And so began the winding, reiterative road of gathering data by listening to the words of online learners using a semi-structured interview format – "a purposeful conversation usually between two people (but sometimes involving more) that is directed by one in order to get information" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 135).

Towards that end, I listened for the stories of "little things," since, after all, it is the little things that constitute our realities. It could be the creation of a learning environment through turning a favourite lamp on low so that there is no glare on the computer screen; or it could be the need to italicize special words so that the reader of those words can best imagine the intent of your diction; or it could be an immediate reaction to respond to the colleague who colours her writing green before responding to the colleague who over-punctuates with exclamation points, dots, and dashes.

I "lived" with my data in the "recursive, analytical process" (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997) that constitutes interpretive research. The journey, begun long before I actually arrived at my participants' locations to interview them, included written, telephone, and email interactions that worked cumulatively to create interest, energy, and engagement in the notion of the study. My "finished text" – recognizing that in interpretive research the issue of when a work is "finished," when enough data are enough, is often debated – celebrates "the linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development" (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 15) while presenting a careful construction of learners' stories that would fairly honour and respect them.

Voice and Signature

But "'nothing speaks for itself,' Norman Denzin reminded us" (Ely et al., 1997). The telling of learners' experiences required *my* voice to be heard in my work. As Conle (1996) explained when she spoke of the concept of resonance and echo:

> When a story reverberates within us and calls forth another in an echo-like fashion, we pull that remembered story out of a previous context and place it into a new one. . . . The decisive factor is what we put next to what. (p. 301)

My own extensive experience as learner, teacher, and researcher lived within the larger story of learners' lived experiences. The struggle for voice required constant vigilance and attention not only to what was spoken but also to what was unspoken. I sought to be sensitive to the issue of voice in my interpretation and preservation of participants' experiences through a careful and detailed interview process and by continual and recursive handling of data. In this way, I hope that the retelling of participants' stories does not suffer from uneven or inappropriately imposed meanings through the textures of silences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 172).

In the same fashion, the balance of signature – the type and quantity of imprint that my style insinuated upon the display of voice while establishing my own identity – was subject to question and critique. I sought to ensure the textures of voice, tentativeness, colour, and ambiguity, celebrated by Bateson (1994) as "the warp of life, not something to be eliminated" (p. 9). I hope I have established a balance as well by introducing the participants to readers in brief, descriptive sketches where their personalities and situations would be evident before I presented their conversations.

Interpretivist Research as Self-reflexivity

The connection of my personal and professional journeys with my research question and methodology supports Steier's description of "self-reflexivity as social process" (1991, p. 3). Describing reflexivity as "a circular process, in which reflexivity is the guiding relationship allowing for the circularity" (p. 2), he suggested "that we understand and become aware of our own research activities as *telling ourselves a story about ourselves*" (p. 3).

In the constructivist view, the making of meaning – touching meaning – both personally and collaboratively, encourages us to reshape ourselves when we explore new paths as we continue (Crites, 1971; Kerby, 1991; Zinsser, 1987) on our own journeys. And, following Steier's work, Schwandt (1994) suggests that our process "bends back upon itself" and our "'remakings' are not simply different interpretations of the same world, but literally different world versions" (p. 126).

Similarly, Jonassen (1992) suggested that constructivism "proposes that learning environments should support multiple perspectives or interpretations of reality, knowledge construction, context-rich, experience-based activities" (p. 28). Jonassen's application of theory supports constructivism's definition as "socially constructing a world or worlds, with the researchers included in, rather than outside, the body of their own research" (Steier, 1991, p. 2). Steier's contention that the circularity of reflexivity is central to the notion of constructivism also embraces the notions of echo, resonance, and responsive chord that hallmark the "endlessly creative and interpretive" rhythm of qualitative research" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 14).

Both the concepts of reflexivity and narration are subject to the same concerns from some parts of the research community as regards their experiential interpretation and the perception of the worth of research that does not speak conclusively about what is "out there" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Miller, 1994; Steier, 1991). My response to that discourse invokes comments from writers as vocationally and chronologically diverse as theologian and educator, Grundtvig (Kulich, 1984), and philosopher and novelist, Umberto Eco (1998). Grundtvig, preaching in early 19th century Denmark while implementing the folkelieg, "school for life," emphasized that the value of learning is in the experience of the living; the institution itself is hollow and must be infused with meaning by its residents. Eco, a more recent discussant, described the problem of factual meaning:

> How, for example, can we say that it is raining outside right now? We have to negotiate what we mean by "rain." It must not be confused with "dew"; it is water on your hand, but the water shouldn't fall from the roof, otherwise it cannot be rain, and so on.
>
> So even such an easy statement as "it rains," that seems to reflect immediately what is the fact, in fact requires a negotiation. (1998)

In this study, I have tried to "specify the experiences" of online learners. The details of my process are outlined below.

Data Management: Collection, analysis, and presentation

The importance of the details of program and delivery model to the findings of this study became apparent to me through the scope of the literature review and the process of data analysis. Therefore, in discussing data management in this section, I have also included an outline of the program in which participants were enrolled at the time of the study. The details of the learners' program were key to the shape of the data that emerged.

The participants

The study focused on the experiences of seven mid-life adult learners. To find participants for my study, I contacted the administrators of an online program and was given the names of students currently engaged in online study within the program. I contacted a number of these students by mail, described the nature of the study, and asked for interested participants. Early conversations held at this point allowed me both to carefully explain the nature of the study to participants and also to enter into some preliminary conversation with them about their learning which they were keen to discuss. The seven that I chose were purposively selected according to these criteria: (a) their engagement in a postsecondary course of study being delivered at a distance using Internet technology or a combination of technologies including the Internet; (b) their affinity to express themselves through sharing their learning experiences with me; (c) their willingness to think about and jot down notes about their learning experiences. Gender was not a criterion for selection, although the study's balance of male and female participants approximately reflects the gender ratio of that cohort group.

The learners that participated in my study were members of the same instructional cohort in a Bachelor of Education program with an adult education specialization. As such, they would have likely studied together in one or more courses, according to the cohort (group) model of distance delivery for this program. At the time of the interviews, some participants *were* enrolled in the same course; some were enrolled in other courses.

The learners in my study varied in their online experiences; they were enrolled in the program's third, or fourth, or fifth course

I had met the participants from having instructed them in one of their previous courses but was no longer involved with their cohort and had had no connections with them since my course two years earlier. But we had a sense of who each other was; I understood the level and extent of *their* experience as learners, and they understood *my* understanding of the online learning process. I sought representation from learners who had shown themselves to be active contributors to online dialogue and also from learners who had demonstrated "less vocal" tendencies than some of their peers.

From our history, we also enjoyed a mutual sense of goodwill that had resulted from our learning experience together and that was still present during the interview process. I felt that I needed a strong sense of trust to dig deeper into their stories; both our previous connection and also my visitations to them in their home environments increased the levels of rapport and built trust among us.

The program

A cohort model was used in the program, in that a group of learners, approximately 20 to 28 strong, began the program together in a course designated as the "starting point." With the exception of option courses, learners, as a group, proceeded through the program one course at a time. Unlike some other more stringent cohort models, new learners were often permitted to join the established group.

Courses in the program were delivered using WebCT, a web-based, text-based software that permitted asynchronous communication among learners and instructors. Courses ran on the university's traditional semester system, for example, from January to

April or from September to December. The program occasionally integrated synchronous chats into its courses and the courses' web presence was supplemented in most cases by printed materials.

Courses would begin on a designated day when learners would access the course website and begin a series of activities that comprised reading print and web-based materials, answering questions and engaging in discussion with other learners and instructors by posting messages to the website, and completing assignments that were based on course themes and topics. Learners were expected to participate regularly and thoughtfully to the topics introduced on the website. Learners received participation marks from the instructor for the quality of their contributions to the course.

Face-to-face orientation sessions were held periodically with each cohort. Course administrators encouraged learners to attend the introductory orientation, held before the first course in the program. Although not all learners were able to attend these sessions, most did. Organizers scheduled two more face-to-face sessions at various intervals throughout the life of the program. Attendance at these sessions was encouraged but not mandatory.

Data collection

I used two primary sources for data collection. I formally interviewed all seven respondents once, for periods of from 60 to 90 minutes, sometimes more, using a semi-structured approach, and heard the stories of their learning experiences. Five of the interviews were held in the places in which learners did their learning. In one instance, because of geographical distance and convenience, I interviewed a participant at the university; in another, again because it suited her, I interviewed a participant in a public place, although I did drive some distance to the small rural town in which she lived.

I was interested in experiencing first-hand the ambience of each participant's learning place, wondering, as an explicit research question, if their chosen place of learning contributed to, affected, or negated in any way the quality of their experience and the rhythms and choices that they made as participants in course activities. Being present in their learning spaces where they had the physical "structures" of their learning around them added a dimension to my sense of them as learners. Interviews were conversational, open-ended, and flowed freely. Quite often our conversations were punctuated or supported by their inclusion of papers, or books, or the demonstration of computer techniques or equipment. I jotted notes during the taping sessions and, afterwards, I further noted my observations and reflections as field notes in a journal. These notes provided me with another source of data.

I had asked at the beginning of the data collection period that respondents take note of their learning reflections and experiences during the particular timeframe of the course in which they were currently enrolled. I asked participants to do this to encourage them to think critically about their participation in their courses and their learning experiences. Some kept notes; others did not. Because I did not ask to keep participants' notes, I have not included their note-taking as a data source. However, those participants who kept notes used their written reflections in responding to my questions. When participants introduced their own agendas in this way, our conversations followed their myriad reflections on online learning. Eventually, those paths re-connected with the research questions.

I followed up with participants by sending them a fully transcribed copy of their interviews. In some cases, I asked for their recall in helping me to fill in a missing word or phrase. At no point were there any gaps longer than a phrase or a few words. I also asked participants to check transcripts for their adherence to participants' sense of the stories they had told me. None of the participants provided any contradictory or negative responses to the interview transcripts. During my analysis of the data, I phoned and emailed each participant to ask once again for further reflection-on-reflection and incorporated resultant considerations into the text.

Data analysis

The recursive process of sorting, categorizing, grouping and analyzing the data is described below. The analysis was neither linear nor sequential, but rather continual, circular, and fluid (Ely et al., 1997; Erlandson, 1993), as was evidenced by returning to the participants by phone and by email in attempts to trace out other circles. I noted participants' post-interview reflections and incorporated their comments into the analysis where appropriate.

Using the analogy of squirrels hoarding nuts for the winter, Glesne and Peshkin (1992) cautioned against the setting aside of data for "devouring later" (p. 130), suggesting instead that the continuous revisitation of data would create a process of vigilant monitoring of what had been collected, its value, and its relationship to the research questions. This was certainly warranted by Erlandson (1993). He emphasized the beauty and the strength of this reiterative process: "analysis is continuous and the analysis of data interacts with the collection of data" (p. 130). In this way, the porous, semi-structured interview was able to respond to previously-collected data by stretching to encompass new areas of inquiry. "Subsequent periods of data collection are informed by what the researcher has learned through analysis of data that have been previously collected" (Erlandson, 1993, p. 130).

Similarly, following the constructivist view that "social interaction does not occur in neat, isolated units" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 130), it was both necessary and valuable to continually "bend back" upon the data for renewed scrutiny and interpretation. During analysis and writing, I found that data that had contributed to one set of discussions were able to be revisited for interpretation and insertion into another thematic rubric, forming the "warp and woof," as it were, of participants' interwoven experiences.

I worked physically with the data in the transcribed records, using my living room floor to full advantage. Although computerized programs exist to catch phrases and key words in categories, I preferred working with the data manually, winnowing through the collection of spoken recollections myself, and reading for the rhythms and patterns and personalities of respondents. I transcribed and colour coded each interview. During transcription I had assigned pseudonyms to each participant. I then paginated each page of each transcript, top and bottom and through the middle, before coding the data by topic, in pencil along the margins. As I physically cut the annotated data into pieces by topic, the matrix of colour and numbers allowed me to track without error who had said what and in what sequence during the interview. Each set of data topics was stored in a separate file folder.

I then categorized those topics into named "chunks " and grouped the chunks – a process called "binning" (Ely et al., 1997). I labelled these groups and organized them into a sequence to best reflect the meanings I identified in each. This circular and recursive process necessitated my continual revisiting of all sources of data, being constantly mindful of new insights that the "emergent nature" (Ely et al., 1997) of qualitative research made possible and entering resultant thoughts into the research journal. Finally, after I had described the data, I returned to the original transcripts and read and listened until three themes established themselves.

Establishing the trustworthiness of the data

Ascertaining trustworthiness in qualitative research is a critical aspect of the research design. Qualitative researchers and interpretive inquirers, sensitive to the need for demonstrated vigor in their chosen methodologies, have examined the placement of self in the presentation of data (Kerby, 1991; Miller, 1994), the concept of voice, (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) and the architecture of constructivism (Duffy & Jonassen, 1991) to frame the issues of trustworthiness within the interpretive approach. The hallmarks of trustworthiness that originated in quantitative research–truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality–have been recast to attend more appropriately to the concerns that arise in qualitative work (Guba, 1981). Taken together, issues of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, voice and signature underpin the methodological raison d'etre of qualitative research and of this study.

In recent discussions of ethical issues in narrative research, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) raised concerns which echo my own beliefs about the difficulty of the researcher's ethical struggle to be mindful of his or her handling of, and presence in, the data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described this process as ongoing and constant, and suggested that, "As we narrate the ethics of an inquiry, then, we need to be awake to the ethics that emerge from our narratives of experience as researchers" (p. 172). That is, researchers as human beings bring to bear upon their inquiry the stuff of their own life histories, and they must also be attuned to resultant issues of responsibility in the matter of "ownership" of related data. Holding that "Relational responsibility is a better way to think of this than thinking of it as ownership" (p. 177), they explain the phenomenon this way:

> As trust develops, participants frequently give researchers carte blanche to say what they wish. Yet researchers, perhaps more aware of how texts may ultimately be read, may find themselves more cautious about how participants are represented than are the participants themselves. (p. 177)

The authors introduced the concept of "wakefulness" to describe the ongoing and fluid reflections that characterize researchers who are resolutely mindful of the shifting landscapes of their inquiry.

The criteria for determining truthfulness have been named in various ways by scholars as they respond to continued self-questioning in their explorations of the field. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) echoed other qualitative researchers (Ely et al., 1997; Erlandson et al., 1993) in cautioning that it is important to respect the language of qualitative research and not to squeeze it "into a language created for other forms of research" (p. 184). I have attended to "wakefulness" and indulged my natural penchant for the qualitative rubric in my writing by working closely with the data myself. I have observed the spaces as well as the words in my transcriptions, by sharing the raw data with those who gave them to me, by examining the edges around the words, and by being able to locate five of the seven speakers physically in their own environments – adding the dimension of presence to recounted experience.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest various ways by which to ascertain levels of trustworthiness in data. In keeping with their notion of sharing the interpretive process with respondents, I "bent back" to participants at several stages during the analysis and writing process. After transcribing each interview into written copy, I sent those copies to the study's respondents and asked for their input, comments, or corrections. Once I had completed a draft of the findings chapter, I send copies of the chapter to participants to ensure that I had represented their thoughts and words appropriately.

During the interview process, using another practice to encourage participant interaction (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), I reiterated verbally with them points they had made while at times probing those points. I returned to notes that I jotted as they spoke to confirm intent and to also serve as jumping-off points to avenues of further discussion. I also shared with them, at times verbally and at times from notes, data from other interviews, when it seemed appropriate to the topic at hand.

Similarly, in the interests of verisimilitude, I assembled an audit trail to enable a third party to determine the veracity of my research process. The audit trail included my notes, my research journal, interview transcripts, and audiotapes. An experienced researcher checked for consistency between transcripts and findings.

In qualitative research, it is important to recognize the limitations of your study, "doing the best that you can under certain circumstances" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 147). To create the most descriptive work possible and to ensure that other researchers could relate my research findings to other contexts, I took care to provide "sufficient descriptive data" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 298). To do this, I have included ample raw data from participants' transcripts. I also sought to obtain a level of richness by using the reverberation of participants' stories across each other, the layering incidents providing perspective and depth.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggest that, to demonstrate a study's trustworthiness, researchers address the limitations of the study as well as the various practices through which they have attempted to establish the consistency of the data, since "limitations are consistent with the always partial state of your knowing in social research, and elucidating them helps readers to know how they should read and interpret your work" (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992, p. 147). Since this study has shared the experiences of only seven online learners, the data, however rich, must continually be presented in terms of those participants' experiences. In addition to the issue of the numbers involved, the issue of the type of delivery model used by the program in which the learners were engaged creates some level of limitation on the findings. Finally, my decision to interview distance learners who lived geographically long distances from me could be seen to limit the number of in-depth interviews I could hold with them. However, over the twelve months of data collection and analysis, the study's participants and I engaged in ongoing conversations that began at first contact and continued through the arranging of my visits to them, their welcoming of me into their homes or learning spaces, and the occasions of our follow-up exchanges as described above. I feel that the flow of continued contact added both depth and richness to the interview data.

Finally, the common use of "self-as-instrument" (Guba, 1981, p. 81) can be problematic to qualitative researchers. Given the centrality of the researcher to the study in the qualitative paradigm, Bogdan and Biklen (1982) suggested that researchers accept their place in the process comfortably and, in so doing, construct an interview dynamic that is open and flexible, a conversation rather than a more formalized question-and-answer period (p. 47). My interviews were very conversational in nature, their comfort level assured in all cases by pre-established trust between the respondents and myself and, in all but one case, assisted by the fact of my travelling to respondents' own spaces in order to talk with them.

Ethics and the Protection of Participants

The protection of and concern for research participants is a prime consideration of ethical researchers using human participants. There are a number of ways in which I ensured participants' optimal sense of well-being in my study and it was important ethically that I outlined clearly to them that no harm would come to them as a result of their decisions to participate in the study. Also, following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) notion of wakefulness, I remained cognizant of participants' relationship to the data that they shared with me and tried to exercise appropriate attentiveness when relating their stories.

To that end, a carefully worded letter of introduction containing a description of the notion of informed consent was sent to each participant. The letter of introduction clarified the nature and purpose of the study and introduced me as researcher, outlining my objectives and my ability to undertake the research. The letter made clear what was being asked of participants both in terms of time and quality of response. It also documented how I planned to collect, handle, store, and ultimately destroy the data so as to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. I assured them that their real names would not appear in any of the data and that they would be identified only by pseudonyms throughout the course of the study. Furthermore, I reiterated that I was not connected with their program and that their willingness to participate would have no bearing on their coursework and was confidential to me alone.

The consent form guaranteed participants the right to opt out of the study, without questions, at any time if they so chose. It also outlined and described their rights to review the transcripts of their interviews and any other texts that I may have created based on my interaction with them. My contact information as well as that of my supervisor was detailed in the consent letter.

Participants received a copy of some sample interview questions that I would be asking them as well as a copy of the overarching research question and its related sub-questions.

As I began each interview, I referred to my copy of the consent form and reviewed it with each participant. On tape, I re-stated the purpose of the research and described how the interview process would proceed.

A complete copy of my ethics documents was submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the Faculties of Education and Extension in advance of data collection. A copy of the letter of consent is included in Appendix A.

Chapter Four

Results of the Study

Following an initial categorization process, I returned the displayed data to the participants for verification. The data comprising these broad categories were gathered from seven members of a cohort group of approximately 22 to 28 students who had taken between three and five undergraduate courses together. Although instructors' requirements for participation varied among courses, the evaluation criteria for all courses included a mark for participation.

I continued following a recursive analysis process with the study's participants. Their feedback on my initial display of data was incorporated into the study's discussion. In all, three major categories of data were identified: influences on online learners' engagement in learning activities; demonstrations of social presence and community; and the importance of instructional presence.

Introducing the Study's Participants

Who are these people who contributed their stories, their insights, and their time to my study? With care and respect, I have tried to draw out the meanings contained within learners' responses to my questions so that others may observe and find similarity to like situations (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Crites, 1971). The short section that follows presents a thumbnail snapshot of each participant in the study, in no particular order.

Marie

Marie was an instructor in a community college setting. She had family at home and there were health issues in her family that were affecting her emotionally and practically. Marie had a computer in the basement in an open space that had no door. But with three children, a husband and ageing parents, she found that she was easily distracted and therefore did most of her online learning from her workplace. Since meeting at her workplace was not possible, we conducted the interview in a coffee shop. Although it was noisy, the interview was buoyant, long, and productive.

Rich

Rich was a senior instructor in a college setting. He lived with his wife and their two large dogs. His workspace was also in the basement, a corner arrangement with no partitions or walls to separate his workstation from the rest of the family room, and that is where we met. Not much light entered this room through its small windows. Rich had a large colourful Tiffany lamp hanging over his corner area that threw warm light onto his desk and his computer while he worked. Paper vestiges of coursework were tacked up around his desk – notes and pictures of classmates. Rich accessed the course site from work as well but used his computer at home in this basement corner office to do most of his work. He discouraged his wife from being downstairs in the basement when he was working.

Rachel

I interviewed Rachel in her country home, nestled among rolling hills and grassy pastures. It was a fresh spring day and all the windows were open. Rachel's young son was home and was invited to sit quietly with his mother for some of the time but also entertained himself with videos downstairs in the recreation area. At times we paused so that she could attend to him. Rachel did her online learning in the same living room where we sat talking together about her learning. She had already obtained a graduate credential in another discipline and was teaching in a postsecondary institution.

Andy

I met Andy at his place of employment in a postsecondary institution. It was Saturday and he was teaching a continuing education course in his area of expertise. I observed him in the final moments of class time and then we settled into his small, concrete-block office where he does most of his online learning. The office walls were covered with printed papers from class activities – some notes, some quotes, and some graphics and pictures from the website. Andy had all his learning materials positioned in close proximity to the computer and accessed them at times during the interview to illustrate his point. Because his office building was directly accessible from a wide hallway, Andy shut his door for privacy when he was engaged in online learning. Andy was married with a young family and found it more practical to engage in his online course from his workplace.

Anne

Anne was a college instructor, married, with one son who lived at home. We met in Anne's bungalow that was roomy and gracious and had a room that had been converted into office space for her use only. It was well appointed with desk, chair, computer equipment, books, cabinets, music and an array of lighting. When she was online, Anne shut the doors that connect to the rest of the house and turned the lights down low. She let her answering machine pick up phone messages and enjoyed the privacy that her environment affords her. She spent many hours at her computer, often in her pyjamas, and made herself comfortable by drawing her legs up underneath her in her large swivel chair. When we met, the house was very quiet; both her husband and her son were away, and her time was hers alone.

Sarah

Sarah worked independently as a project contractor. She and her husband both worked out of their home. I met her there. They had adapted their multi-levelled living space to accommodate their home businesses and had turned a dining-type alcove into dual workstations. Each of them had a large office desk. There was also a full array of communications equipment – computers, printers, faxes, telephones. It was an efficient, busy, comfortable area with lots of books and the warmth of wood. Sarah had to consciously divide her work time from her leisure time from her course time since all those activities occurred under the same roof. Her schedule also included caring for her husband's teenage children who spend a portion of their time with them.

Mike

Mike, a college instructor, was the only participant that I could not interview in his local environment because it was too difficult for me to travel to his location. Instead, his schedule brought him to me, and we conducted the interview at my place of employment, in a small boardroom. Mike laughed as he described the "steno chair" in which he sat at his computer in his workspace in his home. Like Rich, he had a basement space that had been designated "his," and his wife was not encouraged to visit him there. Also like Rich, Mike left his family's living area and "descended" into the basement where his computer, his course, and his online life awaited him.

What They Told Me

This study, driven by the overarching research question, "What influences members' contributions to, and participation in, online learning activities?" generated rich participant response to the questions that sparked the long, semi-structured interviews. As described in the methodology, a "continual, circular and fluid" (Ely et al., 1997; Erlandson, 1993) approach to data analysis afforded a porous process which stretched both with participants' interests and their desire to contribute. Following Ely's system of chunking and "binning" (1997), my iterative categorizations resulted in deliberately grouping like topics into larger topic areas. Those topics are presented here.

Influences on Online Learners' Engagement in Learning Activities

The muddle that often marks midlife for adults has been well documented in adult education literature. Adults returning to learning in adulthood – for reasons of both career and personal fulfillment – jointly reflect feelings of turmoil and searching as their learning gives rise to new tumult in their already-crowded lives (Gibson, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001). Learning, as a social fact within the larger social fabric of adult life, brings with it forces that seep relentlessly across life's boundaries. Both andragogical and constructivist ontologies accept the weight, and the value, of learners' life experiences in the teaching-learning exchange (Dewey, 1938; Garrison & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Mackeracher, 1996).

In this study, I asked participants what influenced their contributions to online learning activities. In large part, their responses reflected critical influences not contained in course design, or in course management, or in the community-based dynamic that enmeshed them onscreen. Pressures extant in their own lives served in varying degrees as impetus and background to their choice-making.

All the participants in this study reflected the combined distance learning/adult education literatures that stipulate, above all, that adults have lives that consume much of their energy (Cross, 1981; Gibson, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001). Each story told had as its backdrop a life story – some more dramatic than others. Marie was living with ageing parents, demanding children, and a husband who was not well. Rachel's small son was hyperactive. Sarah's living room was her office and her study space; she and her husband took turns with his ex-wife in raising his children. Their presence disrupted the quiet of her home/office routine. Andy had a demanding schedule at work – more than twice as many contact hours as usual – and young children at home. Rich and Mike and Anne maintained full-time positions and then rushed home at the end of their working days, briefly saying hello to partners and perhaps not even eating supper before they made their way into the seclusion of their designated work spaces. The pressures wrought by finite time, by the tensions between lives and courses, ran like a current through their stories.

Beat the clock: the importance of time and timing

In discussions of work style, issues of time, and timing, proved to be very important. Pressures related to time led to organizational or timing pressures as learners struggled to integrate their learning into their lives. In turn, timing issues gave rise to what arguably was the most interesting lexicon in the data. The convergence, or divergence, of course requirements with students' schedules contributed to often frenetic decision-making. Marie outlined her perceptions of one learning situation:

> So say we were going to deal with one subject for one week. You start on Monday and one person posts, and another person posts, and then nobody else posts 'til Wednesday. And we're supposed to be finished it by Friday! And I can't get on 'til Thursday night for whatever reason, and Thursday night I'm bagged so I don't go on at all, and Friday night I get to it and there's only, well, maybe there's a few postings. But the discussion isn't there. There is no pacing, no flow. So that was some difficulty there.

Learners' schedules and fatigue levels were intermingled factors, each driving the other at certain times. Mike described himself as a "morning person" but needed to reserve both that time and that energy for his job. His learning, of necessity, was relegated to weekends and evenings, where it was not unusual for him to spend three hours at a time at the computer. But he was tired by then.

Rachel was tired too. With her full-time job and her young son, she could not count on turning on her home computer before ten o'clock at night although, at work, she would "log on in the morning and monitor it all day long." She allotted herself a two-hour timeframe in which to do her course work in the evening. For Rachel, "clearing the board" was her driving motivator – opening every new message and dealing with it in some way. The more "clearing" there was to do – the more messages – the less time she had to make subsequent postings. All her submissions to the course were created during these two- hour windows in the evening:

Rachel: I never post after that time. That's it.

Interviewer: Everybody has a different system. I'm thinking of calling this work "Beat the Clock."

Rachel: Yeah, it is.

Anne had a high level of energy and was noted by others as a prolific contributor to online discussions. With her comfortable and private office space at home, and fewer family commitments than some, she was assured of being able to create the time she needed to address her course load. Her job also allowed her to access the course during the day. Sometimes, though, her fatigue in the evening took its toll:

> Sometimes I have a thought that I can't put into words. And that's really tough, because I know what I want to say in my head, and now I'm too tired to do that . . . too much effort. I might not respond.

Sarah had placed a time allotment on her course in much the way she might schedule a work project. "My time is extremely valuable and, if I'm going into a course … this is the approximate time commitment per week. That's what I'm prepared to put in. I'm not prepared to double my time commitment." Based on her time commitment, Sarah had to evaluate, "Do I read them or not?" when "miscellaneous" messages flood her screen. It was a numbers game, and it caused her this type of rationalization process:

> Can't read 'em all. I will go back later and read them. But I've allocated so much time today and within that time I have to read all of these, I have to read the website, the information, the material, and I also have to write some stuff, you know. So, wow, today is one of those days when I can't read everything, and I'm looking at it, and it's so intimidating because

> there are 100 messages and I only need to read about 30 of those and the other 70 are miscellaneous chitchat.

The study's respondents indicated that they measured their online time in a lump, regardless of the varying nature of the activities that they accomplished within a certain timeframe. Fiddling with the printer, with dial-up connections, or any of the other technical possibilities associated with computers fell within the time allotment that most learners afforded their learning. Anne commented that, when entering a course at any given time, she could not know what particular shape her learning activities would take until she came online. Relating how her family would chastise her for spending hours on the computer when in fact she felt that she had accomplished very little, she compared online learning to face-to-face courses: "I know I'm going to have a two-hour class. When I come to my online class, I don't know the boundaries, and I might … spend four hours on that course!"

Anne also raised the issue of learners' absences from online courses due to holidays and other adult commitments. Like all the study's participants, she accepted the need to check into the course continually and frequently. After a holiday, however, she realized that she would be overwhelmed by "copious amounts" of postings and admitted to skimming through them, a "once-over-lightly," although she emphasized with pride that she *had* looked at "every one of them." In the same sense of finding an acceptable level of comfort with the workload, Sarah discussed leaving "[the online course] with the feeling of satisfaction that I've done enough work on this today. It's put me back in good standing."

Rich described descending to his basement corner and letting "big spurts" of inspiration take him over. He preferred just to let it "flow out" and tried to avoid possible interruptions that might break his train of thought. He would routinely put in four hours at a stretch, alone in the basement while his wife remained upstairs, watching television, and would sometimes be reminded of how long he had been writing on the computer only when it would time-out on him. Like Rich, Mike squirreled himself away in his basement space from the time he got home after work until he was called for supper. Members of his family were not "encouraged" to visit him while he was working online.

The issue of time became evident to Marie when, because of many distractions at her home, she changed her study patterns to do her learning in her workplace. This change in study behaviour brought to light for Marie the fact that her home computer was very slow, and she "figured, 'Oh my God,' I could have saved 25 hours or so" by using a faster computer.

Learners readily compared their abilities to allocate time to their courses to the time they perceived their colleagues were able to spend. Marie was cognizant of the demands on her time when she compared her situation to what she perceived were the situations of other group members who seemed to have more time to spend on the course. Mike felt the same and attributed being "shot down" by some of his colleagues, in response to his postings, to his not having as much time as some of the others to spend online.

> There's always people who have more time than you do. And how do you respond to that? Some people do it from work, a lot of people do. I come on at 2:30 [pm] and there's a bunch of messages there sometimes and the only

> way they could do that is from the job, which I don't do. I don't have the possibility to do it.

Like Rachel, Mike and Marie felt the squeeze of too many familial and life-commitments and mused that "other people" who had more time may have been able to respond to everyone's postings:

> I'm talking about 20 people, and 20 people are doing a project, and some people have been able to respond to every posting! And give back some feedback in terms of strengths and weaknesses. I've only done it 25% of the time. Part of it is due to time.

In spite of not having the time to participate as fully as others, Marie was grateful that others could contribute as much as they were able to. "I recognize a sense of responsibility as a member of the group. In other words, I have to be a giver as well as a taker. That's *my* feeling of social conscience." And, in another type of measurement of time, Andy expressed gratitude at having been the first contributor to a forum at one point; he felt that that "was the very first time I've been on the ball that far."

Sarah's measurement system differentiated "quick hits" from prolonged "four-hour chunks." Like Rachel's all-day monitoring system, she did quick hits every day, nipping in and out of the course to see what was what, to check the status of her postings vis-à-vis replies, or to make a quick response to something that caught her eye. She also wanted to maintain a level of presence.

One of the beauties of asynchronous conferencing for Mike was the time it afforded him to decide when and where to enter the conversation. Taking the time to think about his responses slowly, or even composing them offline using word processing software, allowed him to make them "look better." It also, he thought, laughingly, prevented him from putting "my foot in my mouth so often or [backing] myself in a corner." Rich also took time to construct his responses, noting that some people

> just write and, between the mistakes and the words that don't make sense . . . they just rattle off and post right away . . . it's like a stream of consciousness. . . . I like to have the advantage of choosing my words and not put something out that I might have said in a face-to-face class.

The issue of the volume of postings was key to learners. Several learners presented very quantitative and mathematical descriptions of the numbers of postings that had erupted from various situations in their courses. These occasions were consistently viewed as difficult and annoying and were often attributed to poor course design or management. Marie and Rich were very vocal in listing the huge numbers of repetitive responses that had resulted from a particular online activity.

Sarah had another spin on the numbers issue. She described a course that had been split because of over-enrollment. Originally, Sarah had been in a class that included 10 people who posted about three messages a week – "10 really valuable people that I want to read." After the re-organization of the class, she found herself in a newly-constituted group. Only five of those "valuable" people remained but there were some new ones where "I didn't necessarily want to read their comments but they're like, oh wow, empty space now and they talked even more!"

Changes in group and individual behaviours over time

Learners indicated that they altered their opinions on the nature of their engagement, and noticed changes in the behaviour of others, as they accumulated experience in online learning.

Learners recognized that their response patterns altered over time. Anne admitted that she would now let her thoughts and potential contributions go when she felt fatigued: "I didn't use to. You know, I would say, this is important, but now I'm being more selective. That's a year later." She admitted to opening every message when she first began online learning, out of a type of curiosity, but had become more "selective" as she became more experienced.

Rich's observations over time about the nature of his colleagues' postings resulted in his own response strategies changing:

> The farther I get along in the program, the more I start to learn about the other people online, the more I start to choose by author. There are some postings, I've got to admit, I just give them a glance, and some people . . . you know, some people are just really bad for posting.

Learners were also cognizant of changes exhibited in other group members' behaviours. Andy suggested that he noticed bursts of "political correctness" at the outset of courses, group members "trotting out the party line, [saying] what they thought everybody wanted to hear." He acknowledged that this type of behaviour tapered off as courses progressed.

Rich clarified that he found some people were chronically late in entering discussions, which meant for the rest of the group a revisitation of content already discussed. Others tended to "prattle on. But certainly you start to see the author, you start to see patterns emerging among certain people."

It was also noted that, over time, some learners did not change their discussion habits. It was pointed out that the same people

> just blast off. You can always tell by the amount of spelling mistakes and words that don't make sense and gibberish and poorly formed ideas. . . . I notice that it's the same people who always do the same kind of thing.

Choosing to enter and exit the discussion: why, when, how

The core of this study's research question attended to those aspects that influenced and shaped what learners actually did while they are engaged in online learning activities – did, with regard to making decisions that directed their acts of participation and response. I have categorized learners' choices into decisions that were "person-based," decisions that were message-based, and decisions that were content-based.

In discussing their contributions and postings to online learning activities, the participants in my study spoke seriously about the composition and treatment of messages, both their own and those of others. Even when describing humorous responses or attempts that they had made to "lighten things up," learners in my study indicated that they had considered the nature and timing of their responses insofar as those responses would contribute to the dynamic of the group, to the learning at hand, or specifically to another learner's needs.

Person-based choices

Learners used several different criteria related to the people responsible for or in some way connected to messages in their participation choices. In choosing whom to respond to, Mike tended to make decisions based on familiarity and regularity. Learners who were absent for long stretches of time were less likely to receive a response from him than were colleagues that he "saw online" a lot.

Anne, however, recognized that she learned more from some people than others. In the case of one particular co-learner, Anne's admiration of the other learner's writing style and level of contribution prompted her to usually enter into conversation with her. And overall, she "got to know whose postings I was going to really pay attention to." Sarah, too, chose messages by author, as Rich indicated he had started doing as he became more online-experienced. Using a matrixed decision-making strategy, she would consider author and subject after first combing through the postings for responses to her own work and messages from the instructor. Like several others, she admitted that there were some colleagues whose messages she left to the last, dealing with them only "if I really have nothing to do, when I wanted to catch up, would I read them."

Marie fell into "sync" with learners with whom she felt a kinship and where "you have created a relationship" based on similarities in interests and a resultant "greater appreciation for their kind of thinking." Group members who had vastly different backgrounds and interests "don't have quite the same appreciation or the framework in terms of what they deliver in their postings." Andy also felt that he "clicked better with some people than others." In such cases, he would enter into private email conversations with those people outside the public conference areas. Andy thought that many people were engaged in parallel conversations outside the course, often exploring topics of mutual interest – "because we were both in the north" – or "just getting together and bitching on [the course] . . . 'didn't that stink?' or whatever, things that you wouldn't want to say [publicly]. It's just like gossip, really."

The obvious like-mindedness of some learners worked adversely for others. Rachel identified topic-specific conversations that developed among like-minded group members as *negative* reinforcers in her decision-making. In a comment that related to "cliquish" online dialogue, Rachel also mentioned that at times, among some group members, it appeared as though a vocabulary competition was underway, and she felt unfairly burdened by the space taken up by those conversations on her computer.

Learners who "talked too much" were noticed and avoided by other learners. Andy avoided people who went on and on, not wanting to encourage them. He felt that some people, once started, thought, "Well, I'm in there, and I'm blabbing." Several learners attributed the constant quantity of outpourings of some learners to simply having more time to spend online. Mike's response to what he perceived was over-verbalizing by some of his colleagues was to choose shorter postings to respond to: "The two-page ones, I get lost. If I'm tired, and I see it, I'll speed read, and go on to another one." He himself felt sometimes that he had "rambled on enough. I could say more on the subject, but I'll just quit." Euphemistically, he chuckled, "I think I'll leave someone else a chance to say more."

Message-based choices

Andy chose to respond to short postings, if he had to make choices due to time. His sense of procedure was that he should complete his readings first, so that he had something to say. But sometimes that was not possible, so sometime he didn't feel as if he "had anything intelligent to say at all, so I'll crack a joke. Or I feel like I'm a little behind or trying to get the gist of what's going on from their comments" so he would read online postings instead of the course's assigned readings to "preview" what's being discussed at the time.

Anne considered her response pattern eclectic. She looked for things that caught her interest. "It's not really that calculated with me. Maybe with others." But in the style of a diligent correspondent, if she was involved "in a discussion" with someone – asynchronously – she felt obliged to respond to continue with that engagement. And she always "responded to someone's question to me."

In considering responding to messages by evaluating their features, several learners indicated the importance of attachments in their decision-making process. Rachel used the attachment feature in a novel way. In the interests of time, and because she didn't like the new attachment system, she tended to skip over them. However, if "enough people said, 'Oh, great posting,' then I'll know it must have been good," and at that point she would return to the original message and open the attachment.

Rich had a different type of attachment problem with his slow modem. When large, gimmick-laden attachments were posted in response to online activities, Rich's machine was slow to download, and in his frustration he often left them unopened. When he *did* open them, and took the time to read through them, he noticed that their content was usually no more or less spectacular than any of the other postings. He resented the type of thinking that existed among colleagues that either encouraged or permitted so many “bells and whistles” to enhance what should have been straightforward content pieces.

Learners were very cognizant of “orphan” postings – messages that sat out there in the conference and did not generate responses and they indicated that they felt a sense of responsibility towards them. Mike felt that he couldn’t possibly respond to prolific posters but “once in a while I’ll say, ‘you sure did a good job,’ just an encouraging word. I don’t feel obligated to encourage everybody, but I’ll do my share of response.” If Rachel noticed a message sitting “out there” for a few days, she would respond even if the message didn’t interest her, thinking, “Oh, this poor person, nobody is responding to him.” Similarly, Andy was trying to become “more disciplined about responding,” to contribute to a good idea or to make “some reference to show them that you read it.” He found that having a smaller number of people in the course made it more possible for him to consider responding to the comments of others. On the receiving end of affirmative responses, some learners, like Rachel, were frustrated and disappointed with receiving comments such as a “good job”: “That’s all I’d get. And it was just not helpful at all.” Rachel herself preferred to channel her feedback to colleagues towards creating more thoughtful dialogue: “I follow us with ‘What do you think of this, though?’ or I’ll ask ‘Would you use this, or that?’”

Andy noticed the tendency of some learners to reinforce other learners’ contributions by cutting and pasting from their work. He was suspicious of this, and didn’t like it as a strategy. “They quote so everybody knows they’ve read it, and it’s not a requirement. I think the forums should be fairly conversational, fairly informal.” Like many others, though, Andy liked to find responses to his work. Upon entering the discussion, those were the first items he looked for.

Sarah took another view of learners' reinforcing messages. She came to expect certain responses from certain people and was reassured when group members came forth with postings that affirmed her expectations. "Gentle" people with the healing art of saying the right things were appreciated for their stepping forward to do just that. Sarah put into words her feelings at times like that: "I'm so glad you said that. That's what I expected *you* to say, and I wanted to hear that from you again."

Learners sought in several ways to find order in or bring order to the large volume of messages. Rachel felt that she did not discriminate among messages. She moved sequentially through them, "from top to bottom," although, when pressed on this issue, she did admit to giving long, rambling postings a briefer once-over. In doing so, she looked for "one thing" that she could respond to and then often didn't read the rest of the message.

Rich had a similar sequential style; he liked to "work through everything for the day. I finish every posting. Once I start, I have to go through all the postings and I get through everything, make sure there's nothing new, clear that day." In his organization of tasks, working through postings was the first chore, "and if there's time left over I'll try and work on the assignments."

Rich's schemata of the ordering of his responses categorized many messages in these ways: *obligatory,* where he felt a response was necessary – "Oh, looks good, thanks"; *just talk* – general discussion, not topic-oriented; *repetition* – redundant messages; and *cumbersome* – messages with huge attachments. Winnowing his way through these types of messages, he "whittled it down to about 10," and after dinner he would spend "about an hour and a half or so" dealing with the messages that he perceived to be worthwhile.

Learners commented on the importance of the subject line in making their decisions. Andy, who admitted that he liked "to goof around and be a smart-aleck" sometimes, could be attracted to a message by a funny subject line. He himself would try that technique too "because people might open it up and read it." Not losing sight of her learning purpose, Sarah also enjoyed finding something "funny" in messages but only if the humour accompanied good content. "Funny is good; funny and stupid is not."

Choosing by content

Learners indicated that they made some decisions based on the obvious relevance of messages to the subject at hand. When choosing which messages to respond to, Rachel tried to select the messages that she thought were "on topic." Messages that directly addressed the topic at hand or instructors' stipulations caught her attention and provided her with good fodder for response. She also enjoyed the challenge of other learners' critiques of her work and was happy to enter into discussions to justify her point. Rachel admitted to having an extremely driven, focussed approach to learning. Other group members, marvelling at her ability to accomplish course tasks, had asked her what her secrets were. Rachel's pragmatic answer was, "I just do everything I need to do. It's simple." Coyly, Rachel alluded to the fact that it was her no-frills task orientation that had allowed her to survive through "a lot of courses I didn't like."

Marie had divided her online responses into two categories, one of which was "an educated response." An educated response consisted of "doing the background work, and then being able to post." At best, she was able to do this three times a week; "at the very worst, I could miss five days. Because of *my* life." Marie's "lighter" responses drew on her experiential background rather than the "academic" learning that required time-precious research. Given her limited time, Marie felt that she was always "behind." She was content to keep her unread mail limit down to about 100 postings. However, she was able to do the "lighter" work more quickly and frequently – like posting an opinion on a colleague's entry – and likened that process to "BSing your way through a paper." Marie took her direction from the instructor; a "read this and respond" demanded of her a more structured, academic approach. This was harder to find time for, she realized, but ultimately more valuable to her learning process.

Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Marie explained that there were three ways to classify her treatment of online postings in her learning life: very late, late, and on time. Layered onto her decision-making, relative to the nature of instructors' demands, was the timeframe created by posting dates. "It's not even the topic, it's more the timing. In other words, stuff that's very late, I'm not dealing with." In this way, Marie recognized that a body of "late" course content would accumulate on the website and she knew that she would never find the time to access it.

Some learners followed up their appreciation of relevant messages by printing them in hard copy. Several participants described how they printed off hard copies of things their classmates had written. Some of them were motivated by convenience and organization and want to file away "good stuff" for future reference. Anne would read humorous postings to her outside-the-course friends. One colleague wrote so nicely that Anne just "wanted to keep them, the way she wrote it." Mike printed postings he found valuable, and let his colleagues know that he had enjoyed their contribution: "It was a keeper!"

Rich and Andy both printed off parts of the course and highlighted generously throughout their materials. For Rich, turning virtual text into paper materials was a familiar, pleasant way to learn. "I'll go through and assemble everything, like a teaching folio, all the stuff from all the courses. I just take pages out and assemble them and then I've got this resource book. [The computer] is not my preferred way to read."

Choosing to leave discussions

When group members began repeating themselves, saying the "same things that they've said," Sarah felt, "OK, that's enough of that," and left discussions. Similarly, Anne found that, even as a group, learners sometimes tended to "beat a dead horse," rehashing issues.

The issue of "how much was enough," however, seemed to be affected by one's involvement in a particular discussion. One learner recalled an incident when the instructor had to "jump in" and say, "OK, that's enough, let's wrap." This learner had been content with the length of the discussion because she "was interested in hearing [others'] comments and a few of us were going back and forth." She thought that was all right and the "rest of the group has to know that you don't really have to follow all of this with us, but if you want to . . . jump in. But it's still a part of course content." Other learners voiced impatience with group members playing out their own personal hobbyhorses.

Demonstrations of Social Presence and Community

The concept of social presence has been well developed in recent literature (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rourke et al., 1999). Initially overshadowed by the technical developments that ushered in the "virtual classroom," research has, of late, highlighted the human interface that constitutes so much of online teaching-learning exchanges. Originally conceptualized by Moore (1989), Garrison (1989) and Nipper (1989), the importance of people being recognized as individuals within the matrix of technology-driven learning media has evolved along with contructivist philosophical thought (Brown & Duguid, 1989; Duffy & Jonassen, 1991; Jonassen, 2000).

In the recounting of their stories of online experiences, participants in this study broached aspects of social presence in many ways. The following section displays findings that spoke to the broad notion of social presence and to two aspects that participants thought were important, community – who we were together as a social unit – and etiquette – how I, as a learner, related socially to my online colleagues.

Definitions and understandings of online community

Towards the end of the interviews, I asked participants to discuss their ideas of what community meant to them but the word "community" proved difficult for learners to define clearly. Rachel thought that "community" referred to the "core group" of people who tended to register in the same sequence of courses as she did. As for instructors, they "are just people that come in and come out, and some of them don't even really join." For Rachel, how the instructors joined learners' core-like community was measured by the way they posted their messages. Those who "take all our postings and make one big posting …really haven't been part of the community at all. They've just kind of given the outline."

She believed that they had to participate in the group discussion to be community members.

Sarah defined community in somewhat similar fashion – looking relationally at function. For her, the people that she dealt with "on a daily basis, meaning the group or the community, the instructor, the student participants" were her "direct community." Those removed one level – administrators, other university employees – formed her "indirect community."

Mike approached the notion of community very quantitatively. When asked – in response to his comparison of the spectrum of learners in various courses – "Did you find as much community there?", he replied numerically and related a story of attrition, indicating that course numbers had dropped by about 50% during the life of one course. But without articulating clearly his sense of community, Mike still acknowledged that returning to a course where he knew more about the learners would be like coming "back home." For him, community was manifest in numbers and types of postings. He told stories of courses where he had not felt comfortable in relating to a group of people whom he assumed were "busier people, more professional" than he was and who, it seemed to him, "just posted when they had to."

Rich was able to articulate more clearly the sense of cohesiveness that Mike intuitively recognized as underpinning community's shared goals and character. Describing community as, "It's getting to know the other people in the group," he alluded to the tendency of the group to knit together: "when you start to recognize other people's patterns and maybe a bit about them and a little bit of personality . . ." He also suggested that this process was accompanied by group members' testing-out of others in the group, "to see how far, maybe, the group is prepared to go."

Anne defined her cohort as her community. A member of the healthcare profession, she drew on that background to define community: "Community means you're not in a hospital! My community is my cohort." Within that group, she described feelings of belonging and support, especially in hard times, such as periods of mourning for family members and illness. Anne expected that the sense of community within the group would support group members' crises and was happy to have found, in her experiences, that it did. She had been able to anticipate who would respond to cries for help, both her own and those of others, and felt that the ability to be able to cry in the privacy of one's own home, while working online, contributed to group members' comfort in sharing, and responding to, each other's expressed problems. Anne saw this behaviour as a logical outcome of being "a real person," one who would seek out others in a community with whom to share feelings of grief in times of trouble.

Stating overtly what seemed to be the case with most participants, Marie admitted that "community" as it related to online activity meant nothing to her before she started her program. Now, immersed in her program, she understood it to be

> a group of people who go through an educational experience . . . I think of online learning community as a group of people going through the same thing together at about the same speed, some with lesser experience, some with more experience, [providing] incredible opportunities for networking.

The importance of meeting face-to-face

Learners indicated that the opportunity to meet face-to-face with members of their class at a scheduled site visit had been very valuable to them as a first step in building community. Mike travelled a fair distance from his home in another province to attend a site visit.

> It was right after Christmas and it was hard. There was only a few that came, and I was the only one from out of town. People were surprised that I came just for that, but it was important for me to get the sense of the people, and it's no big deal to travel to do that.

Like Mike, others, too, took away a "sense of the people" from the site visit. Marie, who also travelled to the site visit from out of town, confirmed that

> the visualization was so important, when we went to Edmonton to see who was who, and recognize that these people were all about the same age and working on the same issues that you were, and it was really good. So this group became a group.

Andy's appreciation of the value of the face-to-face visit contributed to his recollection of the fact that his group's picture, showing them together at the site visit, had disappeared somehow from the website. He was among several learners who remarked that a special bond had formed as a result of that one opportunity to meet face-to-face. "I have to tell you, the people I clicked with originally, that very first day, for the next little while, I seemed to kinda talk to them a bit." Asked if they were, on the whole, special, Andy replied: "Not exactly. It comes down to people I remember and had a relationship with, and I would like to *see* these guys once in a while." But when asked about developing relationships online with "new people" who hadn't been present at the site visit, he admitted flatly that he didn't "feel any kinship with some of those new folks at all."

Another perspective on face-to-face encounters came from a participant in a post-interview reflection. In musing about what some new people in the group would be like, she contrasted knowing people at a distance to knowing them in person. The introduction of a teleconferenced session into their distance learning format had turned her thoughts to differences between hearing people, writing to people, and seeing people:

> As if writing can give you a clue! We had our first teleconferencing and some people didn't sound anything like I thought they would. I don't really know what I thought they should sound like but it took me back a bit when I detected an accent or certain dialects. Now, I almost see the accent when they post things on WebCT. Is that dumb or what? Now I am eager to meet them. Maybe we will have another cohort meeting in Edmonton. That is so important.

And, poignantly, in a last word, Andy described being between courses as being "kind of incommunicado . . . it's a little bit like being bereft."

Working towards community: posting and welcoming

The presence of consistent and meaningful community among online learners is, in the constructivist view, key to sustaining the type of interactive exchange that in turn promotes both retention and knowledge building (Bullen, 1998; Garrison & Archer, 2000; Gundawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). I asked questions about participants' perceptions of, and efforts toward, the creation of online community.

Discussions usually began with their explanations of what community meant to them. Generally, however, their articulation of activities, emotions, histories and events around what they perceived to be building community was richer than their ability to crystallize the notion of community itself.

Rich recounted a long story to illustrate how group members' personalities shone through the online medium. Working on a group project together, a colleague that he "had only met in Edmonton" teased and joked with him – in effect, "pulling his leg" on some topic. Rich was known among his colleagues for his own sense of humour and he laughed as he recalled the incident, indicating that he had found it quite funny. In this vein, he discussed the place and purpose of a social forum on course websites, lamenting, in one particular case, the obvious lack of one:

> We always had [one] before, and it didn't seem that it was something that was wanted [in this course] or any avenue for that kind of thing, so that kind of stilted things right off the top . . . so everyone was guarded.

He went on to compare this type of "stilted" ambience to another instructor's freer flow of socially-oriented discussion:

> And it was really fun. You'd log on just to see what he'd say, and he'd say something in the social forum, the lounge forum, and you'd get a sense that everybody was having fun, and that certainly made it interesting in that respect, even the portions that had nothing to do with work. You just wanted to get on and talk.

Rich felt that this kind of activity was a good community builder. "You could really feel it."

Who should take responsibility for creating a positive social environment within online courses? Many students thought that the instructor needed to take responsibility for initiating a sense of community. Mike's comments were representative of some of his colleagues when he reasoned that he felt it was the instructor's responsibility to "get it started," but after that, it became a group process because "we're there as a group, we're colleagues. I think it's important that we all trust, that we talk to each other, we grow. The more we understand, the more we talk, the more we write." At first Mike was concerned about the possibility of "looking stupid" when posting messages to a group whose members were still strange to each other. For him, the process of building community would lessen his reticence to exposing himself intellectually. A part of building community for Mike was the action of responding to group members' postings. Once a degree of momentum was established, Mike felt that the instructors' presence could diminish without harming the group – within reason: laughing, he suggested that if instructors took a two-week hiatus, "you would need someone to throw some fuel on the fire," suggesting that ongoing instructor support was essential for pacing.

Rich put responsibility for initiating community in the hands of the instructor – "well, he would certainly have a hand in it" – and carefully stipulated that instructors who never "open themselves up or give the impression that it's anything other than a purely academic exercise do affect the group." While he didn't necessarily feel the instructor had to assume a leadership role, he did want to see instructional presence – "just to log on, and say something silly, or talk about something else, to get people to know that it's OK to do that."

Learners demonstrated thoughtfulness about the participative steps they took to assist in building community. Anne paid close attention to her colleagues' first postings and began to form opinions of them from that point. She recalled how she would "try to open up somehow, in a way, whatever – 'Is there anybody out there?' – or try to make a bit of a joke, to open up that environment." She noted that not everyone was like that and compared exploring the online personae of her colleagues to logging onto a virtual table in online games of bridge: "I can tell whether it's going to be a friendly table or not." Unlike the bridge game, however, she noted, learners were not free to leave their online group members. "You have to work with them. They're in the classroom whether I like them or not."

Sarah also felt that everyone in the group shared in the responsibility of creating community. She likened online community-building to other types of community-building, with all members contributing to the best of their ability in order to foster a comfortable environment that would nurture the entire group and "doing whatever it takes to make it right." She acknowledged the important guiding role of the "coordinator" whose job she saw as illuminating the way for those who "don't know how" to construct community.

Some possible community-building efforts, however, felt to some participants more like "bandwagon" types of actions. It was noted by several that "certain groups of people always respond to each other's messages." In some instances, a rash of like-themed messages erupted and spilled out into esoteric specialty areas that others did not share. Rachel and Marie and Rich all provided concrete examples of such types of conversations that both occupied valuable space on the website and took their time to open, skim, and discard.

Quite deliberately, learners took steps to establish the kind of safe and familiar environment where they could comfortably conduct the business of learning with each other. They were cognizant all the while of potential and real differences among them as people and of the possibility of conflict should the desired state of comfort not develop. As Sarah articulated: "They need to feel safe, to feel that they are a part of this and 'I'm welcome here and whatever I say is of value too.'"

At the same time, the thresholds of acceptance within the community were varied and not clear, even for individual respondents. "I take what I want from the community," stated one learner.

> If there are things that are not going to be of value to me, I respect their input and if I have time, I can go there and read it. I don't respect people who are contributing to the community who are of no use to the community, so again, the side-chatter that is not doing anything for our community. It's wasting their time. I need to take out what I need to read.

Building online structures, however, and the related activities at the start of an online course, may be a different process from the maintenance that sustains the enterprise.

Maintaining community

The sense of community that educators seek to create in online learning environments is valued by learners for the measure of safety, comfort, and trust that it provides (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Stacey, 1997; Sullivan, 2001). However, there are degrees of comfort among learners with the shape and management and subsequent behaviours of other learners around the use of the social domain in learning environments.

As part of their reflections, participants addressed the social aspects of their courses. Discussing these types of conversations was a part of discussing online group dynamics. Learners indicated that their online postings often fluctuated in tone to accommodate moments of fun or social nicety. Rachel, for instance, was very time-driven in her approach to her learning, a situation necessitated by her work and family demands. She acknowledged that a lot of "chatty messages" were part-and-parcel of the structure of her course but expressed frustration about how much of her time their chatting absorbed. A "great posting" that had taken her perhaps an hour to create might generate some response from her colleagues and then there would be a "conversation," but Rachel looked more for instructors' responses, and when they weren't forthcoming, she felt as though she had wasted her time.

Anne was more likely to join in a conversation just for fun. So comfortable was she with the medium that she once found herself chatting synchronously with a group of people who weren't even her classmates! Anne demonstrated a sense of ease and flow in her relationship to the course website. A self-professed social person, she didn't see the need for separate social areas, reasoning that "some of the stuff gets into the other place anyway." A social forum was "just one more thing for me to check every day."

Like Anne, Rachel commented that social fora were not able to contain all the bursts of social dialogue. This was frustrating for her, given her tendency to want to "clear the board" of messages at each sitting. A new WebCT system compressed the threads somewhat, making it more difficult to see how many messages really lay under the opening salvo. Rachel would have to open each message, each one a new surprise and disappointment:

> Because I clear my board, so I have to open each one, and say, "yup, the same thing," and open, open, open, that's what takes me so long. [Interviewer: Open, open, open; close, close, close?] Close, close, close. My mouse doesn't even work on my computer so it's just a disaster. It takes me so long to get through those messages.

Rachel, living in a rural setting, also indicated that she felt no need to "connect" with her classmates socially in order to not feel isolated. "I socialize and talk with my people at work, and I don't need to do that online." Rachel described herself as a very focussed learner.

On the other hand, she admitted to treating the chat function differently than asynchronous messaging. Because learners working in small groups on projects tended to use the chat function for "forming, norming, and storming," Rachel accepted that more social, informal types of exchanges would occur in that venue. She accepted that she might spend four or five hours in a day, at an appointed time, working on a group assignment. This was a time when she accepted the process of "getting to know people." However, she felt that that degree of exposure was "all I need. So when they're going on afterwards, I just don't partake." Stoically, while admitting that such social intercourse took a lot of time, "it's just a part of what's needed" to get the job done.

Mike accepted the need to keep up with social dialogue ambivalently. He balanced being "too busy to check it out" with trying "to get along with everybody.

Nothing's gained by [reacting] otherwise." He saw it as the mark of a trusting community when group members didn't hold things back.

Like Rachel, Sarah realized that some people have more time than others to spend online. For those people, she felt that avenues should exist to allow them to express themselves, to tell stories, to dally as long as they cared to in social conversation with the group. As a responsibility to the notion of community, she thought that everyone "should go in, at some point. How long you stay in there is certainly up to you and the kind of time that you have."

Marie raised a very interesting procedural point around aspects of socializing online, citing an inordinate number of postings in one of her courses. Her point concerned the intrusion of new people into already-established cohorts and the resultant rash of non-content related postings that resulted, as the new additions "ramped up" to the social ambience of the existing group:

> But what happens is – how do I say this? What I'm trying to say is that there is some extra conversation from some students towards the other [new ones] like "well, you'll catch on" and there is additional support offered to those new members, but the other thing is [that] there is everybody re-establishing their axes to grind.

Marie laughed as she told this story, but the numbers she quoted suggested a frustration at the revisiting of familiar territory by many in order to assist a few. Similarly, Marie described a juncture in the program where a group that had been split apart for one course was re-connected: "So this group has come back together and there's this wanting to share the process of education, and share the, uh, 'Well, how are you doing?' and that kind of stuff." A social forum had been created for "that kind of discussion," but "it wasn't created early enough" and the rollicking plethora of "how are you" messages flooded the course.

Discussion that was not directly course-related, but that arose from the fact of group members becoming socially familiar with each other online, often took the form of empathic outpourings for those who were suffering some type of hardship, not an uncommon phenomenon among midlife adult learners (Wiesenberg, 2001). However, many learners were of two minds about the expression of personal crises online. Marie described the phenomenon like this:

> We have a group of people who are putting on a lot of information that is not important to learning, although it is creating a sense of community. It can be a sense of concerns of people's issues that they're having – illnesses, divorces, all those kinds of things – but if 10 people respond to one person's incident, that's at least 10 messages plus another 10 of "thanks for your caring!" and I appreciate all that, but I don't have time.

Rich described two different incidents where group members located in far-away locations digressed into discussions of social conditions that they felt made their jobs and lives different and more difficult than those of other learners in the group. Rich used these opportunities for "a front row seat" on the world stage to re-evaluate his own life. Many students had responded to these messages, peripheral in nature to the course, but he felt it was a part of their total learning experience, and commended his group on their "really astute observations."

In her thinking about this issue, Sarah had compartmentalized more thoroughly how statements of personal anguish should be handled. The instructor should definitely be told, she thought, when crisis situations made online attendance difficult, "and whoever else wants to know and needs to know, your friends, private email to them: 'Sorry, I haven't been around.' To the rest of the group, quick, one-sentence." She felt it was reasonable to inform group members incisively of the situation. Similarly, responses to others' expressed hardships should be kept short and simple: "Good to have you back. Hope everything's OK now."

Rachel pragmatically itemized the one type of personal entry she could justify in a course: "'I'm having computer problems; I'll post in an hour.' That's the stuff I would put on there because it's influencing what I'm doing, directly." Always focussed, Rachel balked at making public emotional issues partly because of the permanence of the medium. As well, she found her support not through online fora, but with a classmate with whom she worked closely on the job. Again, though, Rachel would share opinions and personal thoughts when interacting with group members using the chat function.

On the other hand, at least one learner specifically didn't think that there was any justification in explaining to other online learners that someone was experiencing computer difficulties! To each his/her own.

Handling conflicts

Learners in the study were highly influenced and motivated by a personal sense of etiquette. They were quite aware of how to behave appropriately online, with the ultimate goal of not offending other group members. Anne put it clearly: "We're adults. We want to come and learn. I mean, I want to be nice to you and I expect you to be nice to me.

That's the bottom line." That said, levels of tolerance were remarkably high. Andy, self-labelled "rebel," commented at length on class interactions with one member of the group who "came off like a blister."

> I sort of acknowledge his opinion: if that's the way you feel, you're entitled to feel that way, but then other people attack him. And I don't mind somebody having an opinion. What I don't like is them trouncing somebody who has a different opinion. I just don't like that.

In response to what he perceived to be a "trouncing" of his outspoken colleague by others, Andy entered the fray, as carefully as he could:

> I sort of phrased it in a way, not exactly like this, but "I know you're not so stupid that you think this kind of thing." Not like that, but [I] put it a way [to] open the door for them to be reasonable.

Anne, describing herself as "a bit of a Chatty Cathy" online, realized that she initiated a lot of online conversations. Correspondingly, other learners remarked on Anne's strong online presence; she was both qualitatively and quantitatively forceful. Amid her plentiful conversation, Anne was still sensitive to others "who are putting other people down, or something like that, [when] they'll say something that isn't nice." Her response to one "blatantly" offensive remark by a colleague was to "respond back in a very gentle manner. It was offensive. I didn't ignore it." As a stakeholder in the group's well-being, Anne was comfortable in dealing with what she perceived as bad behaviour – but in a public and transparent way. Whereas the private email function in WebCT provided a vehicle for information transmission that she was comfortable with using when necessary – "because they've been nice and friendly or because something was promised" – a chastisement from Anne would probably be public: "I'd rather make it public. If I'm going to say that, I want people to know that I've said it to [that person]."

Mike was more cautious. "Sometimes I see that if they feel too strong about an opinion, I just won't go into it. I'll stay back. I won't respond." Mike felt that the private mail function on WebCT was an appropriate mechanism for clearing the air after disagreements but publicly he tried to be "considerate, conciliatory, and to explain the best I can." He likened the computer-mediated environment to face-to-face encounters, observing that there was a "protocol that has to be followed."

Mike expressed the concern that he might offend someone unintentionally through a poor choice of words. Reflecting, though, that "I think we're all guilty of that," he continued: "We say one thing and mean another, and it's permanent. I'm scared to offend people. It can happen. I've been misunderstood a few times." If he felt it was necessary, Mike said he would send a private reply to someone to assure that person that he agreed with his or her opinion on a certain matter, but he "won't talk against another person."

Rachel had watched other learners "just get reamed at" online and emphatically stated that she would not want to find herself in that type of situation. In order to stay "clean," she was very careful in her choice of words and she also took care to respond humorously to others' attempts to be humorous, "you know, kind of kid around with them, whatever." Like Mike and Andy, she recognized her responsibility to maintain a sense of etiquette online. That etiquette extended to her refraining from responding to colleagues who had griped publicly about a particular approach she had taken to the presentation of an assignment. Rachel's point to the interviewer was that while she couldn't compete with those who seemed to have the time to post many more messages to the site than her time permitted, she had some skill strengths that she thought were validly brought to the table.

Sarah was more pragmatic when considering her stance on online etiquette. In spite of her watching partner's admonishment ("Don't send that message!"), she had "fired back" and sent an inflammatory message in response to a developing online fracas. Her underlying belief, however, was to "pull back, and even come back with a wrap up," a technique that Sarah viewed as peacemaking in nature because

> You know what? I'm not going to get anywhere with this [negative approach]. I've got another three years to go with these people and I don't want anyone not reading my stuff because of that, because they're thinking, "Oh God, she's going on and on with this again."

Sarah, extremely articulate and business-savvy, also expressed admiration for those colleagues who demonstrated online communications agility, those who "step in and say the right thing to both sides." Thinking about other group members' ability to balance group tensions with appropriate social grace caused her to reflect on her own presence: "I wish I could have felt that way in the beginning and brought it out that way."

Learners indicated that their silence was often not due to an absence of emotion, or implied agreement, but rather due to their conscious efforts not to contribute adversely to the group's interactions in the presence of negative emotions. In describing situations in which they were not pleased with either instructors' responses or group responses, several described deliberate strategies that resulted in public silence. Rich, for example, a high-profile and lively contributor and described as such by his colleagues, backed right off from an exchange with an instructor which did not meet his needs:

> I thought about sending a private email but then I thought, nah, if he doesn't realize, I'll just let him go, because his attitude is a bit of a know-it-all, done that. They put stuff out that they don't know about. I'm not going to respond. I'll just be a fly on the wall. I like to be a fly on the wall sometimes, and maybe throw something in.

In much the same vein, Mike joked about injecting "a little controversy to stir things up," but hastened to add, "nothing outrageous or whatever." Andy, however, identified a "couple of firebrands" in the group who "don't care what they say." One of these group members had been the subject of examples presented by several participants to demonstrate issues of "bad behaviour" and had been the cause of instructor intervention techniques.

The private email function provided a parallel stream of communication for learners in times of conflict. Anne, who admitted that she wouldn't back away from publicly chastising a "rude" classmate, also indicated that she entered into private email correspondence with like-minded group members in order to debrief public exchanges to a greater degree. Rich also described situations where, feeling fractious over the shape of the public discourse, he would commiserate with colleagues: "'Am I way off base here or is this just ridiculous?'" and it was, 'No, it's ridiculous, it's not you. Should we say something?' 'OK, I will if you will.' And we get on there and start stirring things up."

Daily rhythms of tolerable behaviour in student groups at times escalated into situations of conflict. At times like these, some learners felt that the crossing of certain lines invited different tactics. "Inflammatory statements" propelled Marie to contact the professor privately, outlining her grievances with another student's online conduct: "I'm offended by this, and I really don't want to spend the time dealing with this, and I don't' think it's my job." She was pleased that the instructor handled it well – "One student actually had to apologize online because obviously the instructor had got back to him" – and then wrote her a note thanking her for her input.

Sarah felt that instructors could not insert themselves fairly on one or the other side of an erupting fracas; interventions, coming from students, would be more easily couched against the backdrop of community and would therefore be more discussible and acceptable. While both Marie and Sarah felt that it was the instructor's duty to deal with issues of conflict, they suggested different strategies. Marie took offence at a more personal level than Sarah and found that "one of the ways for me to deal with it" was to communicate privately with the instructor and make her voice heard. Sarah, however, was more pragmatically concerned with time management, and likened online experiences in this regard to face-to-face encounters, reasoning, "OK, let's get back on track now, because we have three hours in here …everyone's time is valuable, and when [it] is personal … tell them to take it outside." Sarah suggested that she would not be comfortable "jumping in" to direct the instructor mid-course, but that she would provide feedback after the course if she felt that course management had not been adequate. As with several of the other students, Sarah's silence, therefore, could not be interpreted as compliance, but rather a reflection of her own etiquette ethos. In Sarah's case, this behaviour was strongly modelled on her own practitioner-role of trainer/facilitator.

The Importance of the Instructional Role

The role of the instructor in online learning has been identified as one of the important dimensions that comprise the teaching-learning exchange (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison & Archer, 2000). Skillful, practised teachers are lauded by learners for their inspiration, guidance, and contributions to knowledge-building (Bullen, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Not surprisingly, participants in this study, when asked to relate stories of their online learning, richocheted frequently onto the topic of the instructional role, weaving references to their teachers into the fabric of their learning experiences.

Instructors' responses provide incentive

Learners liked to have instructors respond to their comments. Recognition from the instructors motivated Mike, especially when he had self-doubts about the quality of his contributions: "And there's a positive comment, and you need that little incentive to keep going. If you don't get any reaction, you'll get disinterested." Rachel said she would be satisfied to receive a response from the instructor "every fifth or sixth [posting] – then I'd know I was on track." She was displeased with the amount of direct feedback she had received: "Now this is the fourth course, and I have not got any direct feedback from any of my instructors, not one, about a single posting I've done." Communal feedback in instructors' summaries at the end of sections or units didn't count for her because "that [input] comes sometimes two weeks after we're in the next topic. So then I think, OK, I wa*s* on track, but after that, it's like, oh, whatever." Rachel attributed her continued performance to her own focus and drive, but admitted that lack of instructor feedback lessened her interest in the ongoing activities of the course.

Rich appreciated being acknowledged by the instructor and was impressed by instructors who made "a point of mentioning everybody who had made a valid contribution . . . [and] mention them by name."

Marie reflected on changes in her perception over time. Well-experienced in online learning, she noted that instructor recognition had been "extremely important" to her initially. Now, though, many courses later, she found that instructors' non-presence irritated her because "instructors have this wealth of information and it is not coming across and it is not being delivered to us and, partly, we missed [learning opportunities]."

The instructor also has management responsibility

The learners expected the instructor to fulfill several different functions. Sarah looked first of all for messages from the instructor when she visited the course site because he or she might be announcing important factual details. She felt that since instructors knew what would be coming next in the curriculum, they would need to exercise judgement about when to move the course along. Mike also headed right for the main forum to check for announcements from instructors, or "something more important than the others."

Anne also felt that instructors had gate-keeping roles to keep students "on track"; she felt that this responsibility belonged to instructors because they had more awareness than did the learners. Rich elaborated further on the instructional management role, alluding to the confusion that could result from threaded postings. He valued the postings of instructors who linked the content of messages to each other. Andy was very aware of his own tendency to wander off-topic in discussions and appreciated instructors who were attentive to his errant behaviours. One of his instructors, described as not entering conversations "at all," was given the benefit of the doubt by Andy – himself an instructor – who mused: "I don't know how convenient or possible it is to do this in this [online] format . . . he's pretty deadline-oriented."

Some learners were conscious of the power of the instructor's role in terms of enforcing workload and course requirements. These learners indicated that they would watch their private email boxes with a certain amount of trepidation when they worked against the clock to meet deadlines, so that "I'm not afraid someone's going to email me in my private email and say 'Where's your assignment?'"

The role of the instructor

The concept of self-direction in adult education has long been a source of discussion and argument (Brookfield, 1990; Candy, 1991). This study's respondents seemed to present confused notions of how they perceived themselves as learners in relation to instructional presence and control. The instructor's role, either as it exists, or as it should exist, also seemed unclear to the learners. Although many educators recognize that a constructivist, collaborative approach is the desired and more effective pedagogical strategy in online learning (Jonassen, 1992; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999), the notion of "instructor" remains for these students an essential element in the teaching-learning process. As Marie stated outright:

> We talk about content and we talk about discussion, and then the third thing is instructor input. And I don't know what incorporates instructor input, but that is perhaps providing an overview to the theory behind what you're doing, or which theorist is in great opposition to another theorist, or the continuum that exists.

Marie continued to illustrate her point by telling a story about an instructor who did not provide "answers." "He wanted you to dig for the answer. He wanted you to create meaning by your own experience." Fine enough, she reasoned, but she was new to online learning at that point, and the instructor's non-presence caused her anxiety. In another course, she appreciated the instructor's " pulling together of responses, recognizing the sections that were missed out, or commenting on those . . . so there would be terrific summarization."

On the other hand, Sarah described the teaching role as "facilitative" and coordinating:

> And the instructors I've had have taken more of a coordinator's role than a leader's role, and that I really liked because we're all adults, and that's true adult education: I don't have to "be your leader" . . . but we definitely need a coordinator.

Andy thought that other members of his class probably took their cues for tone from the instructor but he didn't think, personally, that he did. And Anne, with laughter and a sense of apology, confessed that she tended not to distinguish between instructors' comments and students' comments; in fact, she confessed that she "didn't think [students] cared much about the instructor."

Rachel still wanted directional input from the instructor. "But there's supposed to be an instructor," she emphasized.

> And yet you're not learning anything from the instructor because they're not putting anything of themselves into it except for the initial outline and readings . . . but they're not coming in and asking you, "Well, you said this, but do you mean this? Or do you mean that?"

The instructor is responsible for awarding marks

Learners raised the subjects of marks repeatedly. Their concerns fell into two categories: the nature of the participation grade assigned them for being present, manifested by their online contributions to the discussion of course content; and how the fact of being graded shaped the nature of their contributions to course discussion topics. Marie's approach to the latter was to give instructors exactly what they had specified in their course outlines:

> So one of the things that bothers me is that then, what I'm doing, even at this level, is giving them what they're asking, rather than what I think is important. So in other words, I'm working for the mark then, not necessarily for the personal learning, but the course content is there, you use it, you deliver it.

Rich was working "to try to satisfy, working for the marks." In this regard, a course whose design did not allow him the freedom to respond on his own timetable – a course that demanded, for example, a group response that was difficult to compile because of group tensions – was frustrating to him:

> So it does affect your work schedule. You've got other people messing with your work schedule. It was much easier when it was, "Let me finish the project, put it up, and then [get] the feedback," but not having the constant, having to take that feedback, post, revise, post … I don't find it works at all.

More frequently, though, learners referred to the participation mark as playing an important part in their decisions to participate. When asked about marks as motivators, Sarah replied, “Without a doubt, my participation mark. ‘I’m here! Here I am!’” Rachel found the whole idea of the participation mark frustrating and was sure that, at least in one of her courses, learners had been ranked according to the number of postings they had made. She did not enjoy what she perceived to be the resultant competitiveness among group members.

Mike, keeping the participation mark in mind, admitted that he responded to messages to which he felt he could “contribute more.” Andy was concerned about a participation mark valued at 20% of the course grade; he felt he wasn’t keeping up with appropriate postings and was also behind in the journal required for the course. He admitted to “faking” the journal due to a shortage of time. The course that he was describing had a very heavy response rate, apparently due to the nature of an assignment that required many iterations of responses from each individual participant. Andy joked that he thought the instructor was evaluating them “by the pound” of replies. Rachel also commented on issues of the quantity of postings and their relationship to grades. She was concerned that students were fulfilling the requirements for a unit or an activity by posting x number of messages but that other students fulfilling the same requirements by posting more messages would receive higher participation marks. She felt that this was unfair. As a partial safeguard against abusing the participation aspect of getting grades, she felt that students posting off-topic messages should be penalized and that instructors should maintain a scorecard of students’ postings to legitimize final participation marks. For these reasons, she preferred credit/non-credit courses to courses that awarded grades:

> [The non-credit course] was the best course I’ve taken, because I didn’t have to worry about this nonsense marks stuff and the competition. You

> do all the things you are supposed to do to pass. I do what I'm supposed to do.

Andy had another view of the credit/non-credit system, associating this type of marking system with the instructor not having "to worry about marking." As a result, in Andy's view, the instructor had been "an experiential prof" who had been able to be very "laid-back," and, in response to this comfortable approach, Andy commented, of himself, that he had "put a lot in there" in terms of online participation.

Like Rachel, Marie anguished over "how much was enough." Having been away from university study for 25 years before returning to study in this program, she had been unsure

> how much I had to give in order to pass. Anyway, I ended up giving way more than I needed to, and was pleased with my mark, but I'm going, "I can't do this again, I can't make that commitment in terms of time."

She also noted wryly that during the last two weeks of one course, a "flurry" of postings had erupted as learners jostled for position in terms of quantities of postings when they believed that one particular instructor was assigning grades based purely on quantity.

Rich outlined another way in which he felt that marks drove course activity. In order to "qualify" for their participation marks in some areas, group members would

> jump in, throwing out an anchor and dragging you back to an area, because they have to do this for their participation mark. And they're saying something that somebody else already said, but they didn't [bother to read the postings] because they skimmed through 300 of them and missed the

> gist of what was going on so they're restating something. I'm not going to respond to that.

Competition among students for marks was mentioned by several participants. Rich lamented a course where he felt that the presence of a participation mark had contributed to myriad "self-congratulatory" postings – "oh, that's a good one" – and ruefully admitted that he just couldn't participate in the exercise to the degree that he saw others contributing, regardless of the consequences. Rachel equated learners' perceived dislike of group projects to the generally lower marks received for group projects. Rachel also expressed frustration at the obvious amount of time that some of her classmates were spending online in what she perceived to be a contest for participation marks and attributed the competitive environment to the coming together of

> high achievers. This is a group of high-level, working people. They come home and I'm sure they're online all night long. In some ways, I'm competing with that and I can't, I just can't compete with that.

In another course, Mike considered a 15% participation value to be low, and remarked that it had apparently not served as a strong motivator for many members of the class since there had not been a high level of participation. He had felt "lonely" in the fora and whereas he did not blame the instructor for the lack of participation, he admitted that his "heart was not in it as much." He didn't feel that he had contributed as much as he could have had he felt more committed to the course.

Summary

Following the presentation of individual portraits of my study's seven participants, I discussed the major topic areas into which I had categorized the study's findings: influences on online learners' engagement in learning activities; demonstrations of social presence and community; and the importance of instructional presence. Within each of these large topic categories, I discussed a number of related topic areas.

Influences on online learners’ engagement in learning activities

Embedded in this topic were issues of time and timing; changes in group and individual behaviours over time; and choosing to enter and exit the discussion: why, when, how. In discussing learners’ choosing to enter and exit online discussion, I categorized the findings according to the nature of learners’ choices: were their choices “person-based” – dependent upon author, or personality, or other personal factors? Were their choices based on the message itself – on its subject line, its length, or its presentation? Or were their choices content-based, according to topic, to subject, or to the perceived fit of messages to the learning at hand?

Demonstrations of social presence and community

Contained in this topic were the issues related to understanding and defining community, the importance of the contribution of face-to-face meetings to the development of online community, taking first steps to entering the online community, maintaining community, and learners’ sense of etiquette and handling of conflicts.

The importance of instructional presence

Within this topic area, I discussed the importance of the instructional role in providing incentives to learners to participate, learners’ perceptions of instructors’ responsibility for course management, and the importance of marks in learners’ decision-making processes.

Chapter Five

Discussion of Themes

In my adult education-oriented, constructivist view, learners sit at the heart of the enterprise. This study sought to know what learners were *doing* in their corner of the online world, accepting as a constructivist premise that their online learning was defined, in some measure, by conditions around, outside, apart from, and connected to, the courses in which they were enrolled (Jonassen, 2000; Wenger, 1998; Wiesenberg, 2001). The categorized data reported in Chapter Four gave me valuable insights into how these learners made decisions about online participation. I returned to the transcripts, and from multiple readings of the data, three themes eventually emerged: a) the functionality of learners' engagement in online learning activities; b) online community, respected yet frustrating; c) online "being" as social presence.

The Functionality of Learners' Engagement in Online Learning Activities

For these participants, there was little romance in online learning. Instead, the rhythms of learners' participation were driven by functionality, accountability, and competitiveness. Learners were unabashed in their abilities to count off numbers of messages per course, numbers of messages per student per assignment, or numbers of hours spent daily on the various types of chores constituting online learning. In this sense, the flow of learning, the nature of the exchanges that characterize teaching-learning enterprises, took on extremely business-like orientations that were both meted out and measured. I am unsure of the parallel in traditional face-to-face learning environments, never having had classroom learners indicate to me, in my role as instructor or administrator, in any way, that they had itemized or valued learning experiences in terms of the number of times they spoke or were spoken to. Physical attendance in classrooms, measured by presence, although in some ways similar to attendance online, as measured in postings, is mitigated by other communication factors that speak to other issues besides the value of that learner's academic contribution to the group. For example, I have had students in classrooms who, in all frankness, really brought nothing to the intellectual exchange, nor were they particularly verbal in phatic conversation. But, perhaps, because of a flair for wardrobe, or gesture, their presence in the group dynamic was noted and acknowledged by their peers. There is very little by way of comparison in the virtual classroom to replicate this sort of substitutive participation in the learning dynamic.

The immediacy and constancy of online learning amplified and changed some of its face-to-face learning parallels in ways that affected learners' responses. The issue of participation marks was a good example. Learning was business and business was marks. Marks were amalgams of many things – but participation, and learners' presence manifested by participation, was certainly one of the important components of earning marks online. Competition for those marks was at the heart of some learners' decisions about how often, when, and where to enter online activity. As Rachel pointed out so succinctly, she didn't have as much time to spend on the website as she thought that some of her colleagues had. It was important for her to make the right choices in order to fulfil what was expected of her according to the instructor's guidelines. Instructional direction, therefore, was an important dimension of Rachel's learning experiences (Anderson et al., 2001). As a result, Rachel attributed a part of her frustration with some courses to what she perceived to be faulty direction from instructors, leading not to exchanges where she was able to learn and contribute her own knowledge to the discussion, but to the mindless repetition of lower-level factual pieces of information. For Rachel, this was valuable time wasted. Several other learners also indicated that their first order of business was attending to instructors' messages to ensure that they were "on the right track" and not missing out on any important movement in the course.

Could it be that the substitution of a virtual environment for a three-hour-per-week classroom involvement brought with it new systems of self-measurement and pacing? That rather than accommodate course-taking by the sacrifice of an evening to an institution – measured in hours or kilometres to drive – online learners kept track of their efforts and their invested energies by words and exchanges, in addition to hours? Did they hold a quantitative sense of how much investment was warranted or appropriate? Brown's (2001) research indicated that learners at a doctoral level had "decided on their level of commitment and allotted their time accordingly" (p. 29). Contributions, in this view, became valuable currency in the economy of learning. There was so much to "buy," so much merchandise for sale. Rich and Marie both articulated pointedly and quantitatively their systems of task analysis in the allocating of their time to tasks-at-hand. There was content, instruction, group interaction, sharing, caring, agreeing, affirming, positioning, and many other levels to demonstrate cognitive interaction in the taxonomy of learning (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kanuka, 2002; Rourke et al., 1999). In another study I found that online learners were very dedicated to the mechanics of a course that was just starting (Conrad, in press). This study's data indicated that, to some degree, this type of utilitarianism continued to underpin and determine learners' participation decisions.

Overall, the learners' approaches to their learning seemed to be earnest but functional and dispassionate. In a related fashion, their sense of "successful outcomes" of their courses was founded on decisions that were time-based and strongly conditioned by well-articulated desires to maintain pleasant, uncontroversial learning environments – a "safe place to be," as Sarah described it. For these busy professional learners, a successful outcome was defined by satisfactory course completion with two caveats. Firstly, they were happy if the routine of their lives was not extraordinarily disrupted. Secondly, they sincerely wanted the well-being of the group to have been sufficiently maintained so as to provide a welcoming haven for them when they enrolled in their next courses of study. As Rich pointed out when asked about his learning in his online course, "There are certain things that I definitely learned from the course, but I sure could have done it with a lot less effort. For all that went into it, I could have done it a lot simpler." Rich was referring to the energy and effort, measured in both time and interpersonal communications dexterity, that online existence had required of him.

Since the learners in my study did not enroll in their courses out of a need to create social activity or *make* new friends, the actual establishment of friendships was not regarded as an anticipated or expected outcome. Friendships did form and "participants found persons toward whom they gravitated on a regular basis" (Brown, 2001, p. 29) due to reasons of similarity in background, motivation and lifestyle.

The learners in my study perceived that instructional presence was key in ensuring that their engagement in their studies was as smoothly managed as possible. Whereas Palloff and Pratt (1999) used a doctoral seminar as their research laboratory and indicated that their participants viewed the instructor as an equal participant, my study's undergraduate learners, although adults, did not perceive their instructors as equal. In fact, they expected much more leadership and gate-keeping from their instructors and were dependent on them for guidance, management functions, reinforcement, and reward. They needed instructors' feedback both to ensure that "they were on track" and to motivate them to continue contributing to discussions. Absentee instructors were perceived to have abnegated their responsibilities both functionally and academically. Learners reported that instructors' absences were connected to both decreased interest levels and *increased* anxiety levels as regards the ultimate awarding of marks.

Learners' participation in selected learning activities were motivated in part by their perceptions, balanced against the constraints of time, of *which* activity-generated responses would best fulfill instructional demands.

Over time, however, more confident learners indicated a diminished sense of the instructor's day-to-day importance. My sense was that learners had discovered experientially over time that courses could be completed successfully without forming a strong attachment, either intellectually or personally, to the course instructor. In some part, these perceptions were validated by research that reaffirmed the collaborative nature of online learning, finding that, compared to face-to-face learning environments, online "students asked more rhetorical questions, using them to persuade, think aloud, and indirectly challenge other participants" (Blanchette, 2001a, p. 37).

The comments above are not intended to diminish the levels of dedication that were demonstrated by the learners in my study. Quite the contrary. Within their understanding of the level of commitment that they were willing to give to their online studies and within the framework of functionality that directed their actions, learners worked very hard online. In exchange for the flexibility offered to them by online learning venues, they accepted long hours of isolation at the computer, frustrating technical glitches, and the interpersonal and pedagogical difficulties that they articulated as ongoing and problematic realities. Efficacy and tolerance substituted for passion. Rachel observed, of her most recent course, "I found it tedious and I didn't like doing it, but I learned." Similarly, Rich concluded: "Online is the only way I can take a course and still have a job. But face-to-face would be more to the point in a lot of ways and a lot clearer." I heard these pragmatic learners saying: "Would you look at this crazy situation I'm in? I am committing all this energy to this learning. I have no choice . . . it's frustrating but what are you going to do?" A rhetorical question was coupled with a smile and a shrug.

These learners voiced their appreciation of the accessibility afforded by online learning while balancing in their considerations of it the aspects that they found taxing or tedious. They were candid in their expression of its functionality as a learning opportunity.

Online Community, Respected yet Frustrating

In investigating the way that online learners made their decisions to interact and participate in online learning activities, I talked with participants about the sense of community that underpinned, enveloped, or in other ways affected their presence in online courses. The relevance of community became pervasive in this study, woven inextricably into the fabric of learners' responses to my questions and, upon analysis, into the fabric of their learning lives. As such, its discussion in this study ranges across several topic areas, each providing another lens through which to view and understand its impact, each providing another "linkage among the data elements as parts of an unfolding temporal development" (Polkinghorne, p. 15).

For learners in my study, the construction of a learning was key to success in online learning. In response to Palloff and Pratt (1999) and other literature that discuss an online community, I argue: 1) that there are significant differences between a one-time or a short-term online existence and an on-going programmatic experience; 2) that the introduction of a cohort model to online learning affects the nature of the community that is formed; 3) that the combination of intellectual sophistication and maturity that accompany doctoral studies or other research-based learning experiences creates a unique learning environment that is significantly different in quality from undergraduate or non-credit learning environments; 4) that even one face-to-face opportunity affects the creation of community; and 5) that the midlife professionals in my study demonstrated the development and maintenance of online community to be a functional, time-driven, and carefully modulated activity.

The reciprocal relationship between participation in online learning activities and the evolution of community forms the nucleus at the centre of the online course. Which comes first? I suggest that participation in online learning activities exists *before* community, contributes to community, is the vehicle for maintaining community, and eventually becomes the measure of the health of community. That is, learners' participative energy and focus evolve during the life of the course. At the outset, learners' energies are devoted to becoming established cognitively and logistically within the course. That done, learners develop commitments that recognize the importance of building a comfortable "learning home." As is the case in learning environments, the hearth fires of the virtual home are tended more by some than by others (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Considerations underpinning my learners' contributions to maintaining a pleasant and hospitable learning space included attention to etiquette, the emphasis placed by the instructor on activities as warranted by the allocation of marks, and finding “the path of least resistance” to completing courses.

Brown’s (2001) research suggested three levels of community development that included an ultimate long-term type of commitment among learners. My findings echo that research although I could not confirm from my study her conclusion that “Each of these [three] stages involved a greater degree of engagement in both the class and the dialogue” (p. 18).

Online learning community differs from other types of community in other types of cyberspace venues. The “virtual community” of the Internet (Turkle, 1995; Wallace, 1999) is not the same as the online community of the virtual classroom. The differences among types of community manifest themselves in sets of learning behaviours that are unique to online learning environments.

As a medium, users accepted online learning for what it could provide to them and for them. Theirs was a remarkably functional and unromantic relationship, more akin to a contract. A part of that contract stipulated that users must invest many valuable hours into their learning endeavours and I found that these learners observed that part of the contract.

Their dedication, in fact, was superior. In the name of their studies, learners conquered balky technologies, endured broken connections, navigated stormy groupwork, and tolerated absentee instructors. On personal fronts, they transcended incidences of marital difficulty, illness, and family tragedy. They spent money on better equipment, on reams of paper, and on attending valued face-to-face visits with their group. They demonstrated organizational competence in gathering and compiling resources and printing materials from their courses. Their time management skills were tested and sharpened.

They executed to the best of their ability the tasks set before them. Community was constructed and maintained as a necessary tool for the completion of the task. Participation, measured and calculated, fed community as needed. Is all formal learning like this? Are all interactions like this? Recall Anne's initial sense of what I meant by "community" when I asked her what the term "community" meant to her: she turned to her real-world understanding of a common phenomenon in order to ground her understanding of the concept.

Our sense of community in our flexible, transient, modern society reflects like-minded groups of people gathered together, sharing goals or galvanizing events (Garton, Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 1997). Community may or may not have a physical dimension to it.

Our traditional classrooms contained the makings of "community," bringing together into a physical space a group of people who shared a goal – generally successful course completion – although their motivations in coming to that goal varied (Cross, 1981). The fact of their existence for a limited amount of time in a given weekly timeframe created a behavioural pattern for its members. Many well-established rhythms and sets of dynamics govern the interactions that occur within the classroom, not the least of which is the physical presence of an instructional force that is associated, even for adults, with issues of power and control. The critical understanding of online learning and *its* particular sense of community reflects the online classroom's unique and deliberate "construction," where community is "built" through the careful architecture of well-intentioned course designers who believe that their ministrations are "an act of supporting the natural development of relationships" (Schwier, 2001, p. 5). Although online communities exist virtually, there are important differences between online classrooms and the rest of the Internet. The option of choice is not present in online learning, if we accept that withdrawing from courses is generally not regarded as a satisfactory conclusion to an earnest learning commitment. Online learners must commit and be present. Unlike Internet-users surfing the net or engaging in other types of fantastical, recreational activities (Turkle, 1995), there is no anonymity in learning. In referring to Internet interactions, Wallace (1999) points out that

> research suggests that the degree of anonymity affects our behaviour in important ways and leads to disinhibition – a lowering of the normal social constraints on behaviour. It is not an all or nothing variable, especially on the Internet, but we feel more or less anonymous in different Internet locales, and this affects the way we act. (p. 9)

Going one step further, I would suggest that in online learning, the combination of these factors – online learners' lack of anonymity, learners' strong sense of purpose, our societal inclination to be "nice" people, and learners' prolonged commitment to a program of learning – created in this study's online learners an *increased* sense of inhibition. In turn, that sense led to learners' concerted efforts to maintain equilibrium and harmony.

Learners in my study emphasized strongly a sense of compliance to tacit standards of respect and etiquette. While Brown (2001) accounted for learners' demonstrations of respect and expressions of encouragement as being rungs on the ladder to building trust, the learners in my study contributed another layer of motivation to an already measurable, and measured, reality (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Rourke at al., 1999).

A number of circumstances specific to the learners in my study could account for these findings. Primary among them was the nature of their cohort-designed program and hence the length of time that they had already spent together in learning and the amount of time that they anticipated spending together in learning in the future. Within this design, a certain level of participation was required of them in order to succeed in their courses. Other studies differed from this study in areas that would affect this very critical dynamic. Studies that featured non-mandated participation, participation in non-credit courses, courses that were "one-time" online encounters, or studies that reflected opportunities for learners to participate with learners in other ways – most notably, in face-to-face interactions – demonstrated outcomes that reflected these changed dynamics (Brown, 2001; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; McLean & Morrison, 2000).

Online educators place the creation of community high on their list of priorities, understanding the existence of a safe, nurturing environment to be foremost in contributing to learners' happiness, sense of comfort, and, ultimately, rates of completion (Bullen, 1998; Conrad & Kanuka, 1999; Ekhamel, 1999; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). In the style of Eliot's hollow men, however, I found the notion of community as told to me by the learners in my study to be lacking. Viewed in the kindest light, learners did not initially understand the concept of community. Many of them were, at the time of interviewing, engaged in their third, fourth or fifth course, yet their ability to describe community in abstract terms seemed to be weak. Several quantified the concept, trying to capture somehow the idea that community involved some aspect of relationships with others in their learning group. Others likened it to the fact of parallel experiences, again a largely quantitative measure.

In her research, Brown (2001) reported somewhat similar ambiguity around participants' views of community. Among her 21 respondents, five confessed to no sense of community at all. Four were inconclusive in their remarks. Almost half of her participants were unmoved by the concept of community. Echoing some of the concern that I heard in the stories told to me by the learners in my study, Brown gave these reasons for her respondents' lack of community: participants were enrolled purely for the credits and did not even consider the notion of community; because there were no marks given for participation, learners did not *want* to become involved with community; learners were "out of synch," suffering health problems or other personal issues; learners wanted face-to-face interaction; learners did not see the value of extending online relationships beyond "practical" levels (Brown, 2001, p. 26).

Prolonged discussion about community during the interview process brought forward a few more comments, such as Mike's simple but eloquent comparison that likened returning to a familiar group as coming "back home." Still, I was struck by the difficulty they had in putting words to a notion so central to not only online learning but also to the program in which they were engaged. I knew from experience with the program that the idea of "community" had been presented to and discussed with learners during their orientation session in an administrative effort to define, encourage, and assist in a cognitive fashion, and as much as possible, learners' understanding of the concept.

One of the most valuable insights about community came from a post-interview exchange. Anne commented, in a follow-up discussion, that

> When you first interviewed me, I had a whole different concept of what "community" meant in the context of online learning. Now I think it is safe to say that my cohort community has a culture, sort of an academic culture, feel we are in the same boat! It is so nice to get online and you know someone will be there. We are sort of a family.

This comment, and the fact of Anne's retrospective insight, highlighted the benefits of longitudinal research.

I was also surprised that learners' management of community in such pragmatic and business-like ways belied the pastoral and altruistic sense in which it has been portrayed in the literature (Stacey, 1999; Yeoman, 1995). Two related notions come to mind. Firstly, research conducted among distance learners completing undergraduate courses from an open institution using the correspondence model (Conrad, 1991) indicated that learners verbalized strong appreciation of the institution's support services that were in place should they have needed them. However, none of the learners that were interviewed for that study felt that he or she needed to access those services, regardless of how they were progressing in their studies. In other words, devices that were constructed to facilitate avenues of support existed as good conceptual models, like safety nets, but were not well used. Similarly, Brown (2001) concluded, among her propositions, that "community did not happen unless the participants wanted it to happen" (p. 31).

Secondly, more recent research (Conrad, in press) indicated that learners just starting their online study in what could be defined as the "first class" were not concerned with the existence, establishment, or building of community with either other learners or the instructor. In that critical initial "get started" period, learners' major concerns revolved around mastering the "business" of the course: understanding course demands on them, ascertaining schedules and assignments, and making sure that they were in possession of all instructions and all materials. In *this* study, although learners alluded to the creation of some sense of community and were able to discuss their contributions to and feelings about those parts of their course experiences, many of them still "used" the existence of community in very measured and functional ways. In this regard, they were not so unlike the "first class" learners who priorized what was important to them in their very first online sessions, and, exhibiting the same "not for me, thanks" inclinations as the correspondence learners in the 1991 study, their reflections on the potential and existence of community tended toward the ideological.

Most of the study's participants drew firm lines around what they would or would not tolerate in the creation and maintenance of community. "A little bit" of social talk, a little bit of digression, and some limited time to both express personal trauma and to respond to the crises of others were tolerable to most. Even within the quantitative limits of tolerance, however, what was qualitatively acceptable to some was not acceptable to others. Marie, for example, did not feel that telling other students that she really appreciated their comments was information that needed to be posted online. "I think the *very* best way to deal with that is private email," she commented. Other learners, however, felt that their words of encouragement were reasonable additions to the social and motivational flow of the course.

And, most overwhelmingly, several learners – men and women alike – recounted stories that named numbers of messages and tied those numbers of postings directly to time spent online, framed as either precious “found” time that had not been available to them at all, or time better spent in other learning activities. In other words, dealing with community, and being part of it in participative ways, was deemed by most as inconvenient and taxing. Many of the resultant comments that attended to matters of community, therefore, were “duty” postings. While these kinds of postings would elevate the levels of agreement, sharing, commiserative and other social affective behaviours that have been measured by some transcript analysis procedures (Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000b), from learners in this study, it seems, the true value of their presence is suspect and some studies’ conclusions that “receiving such messages bolstered participants’ self-confidence and raised their comfort level” (Brown, 2001, p. 29) could be questioned.

Setting up a separate cyberspace for social conversation was not considered by most learners to be much of a solution for excessive online social chatting. Several learners indicated that it merely created another place for them to have to check and thus spend more time navigating the site. Overall, they felt that the creation of such social spaces was superfluous anyway because of the difficulty – in fact, the impossibility – of keeping the extraneous chat introduced by some learners *out* of the designated learning spaces. Interestingly, even those learners who felt that they were being polite or social or supportive to other group members by making jokes, or posting messages of concern, were impatient or critical of other learners' indulgences in similar behaviours. In the most pragmatic ways, learners explained their activities in this regard in terms that spoke to "community as tool," that is, they adopted community interaction as a functional spoke in the wheel of learning and plied it as such. I did not get the sense that learners interacted with community emotionally, at the level of "deep connection" or shared character that would possibly sustain lasting relationships. Supporting this notion, Brown's (2001) study indicated that interaction among learners ended when the distance class ended.

Having said that, my study uncovered at least one case (and I know personally of others in other course circumstances, including a full-blown romantic relationship), of a friendship that had developed between two learners, one of whom participated in my study. In post-interview discussion, this learner mused about how she had never expected to have become such good friends with someone who lived so far away through the medium of an online course. However, it should be pointed out that as the friendship developed, it took shape offline; that is, the personal bonding that characterized their friendship occurred in private email within the course, outside-the-course email, and by telephone, resembling, in its shape, the development of friendship anywhere. That is, individuals of like aptitude, interests, background, and circumstance, through the vehicle of communication, "found persons towards whom they gravitated on a regular basis … because of similarities in motivation, dedication, academic or personal background" (Brown, 2001, p. 29).

Examining this dynamic from the other side, I argue that learners' *lack* of embracing online community occurred in spite of, not because of, program designers' best intentions. Like other informed, well-intentioned online programs of learning, this program structured many community-building devices. The face-to-face orientation, once mandated but in recent years – due to students' financial concerns – reduced to being only "encouraged" and strongly suggested, was cited by most learners as having been very fruitful and extremely important in the development of their sense of community. This two-day weekend activity comprised social interaction, ice-breaker activities, numerous student orientations and some content delivery about both online learning and actual course curriculum. Pictures were taken and later posted to the website. The online social venue was previewed, introduced, and rationalized. In spite of these efforts, learners' subsequent appreciation of that venue as a social nucleus was limited.

The learners in my study exhibited a participation in online learning activities that created and built community judiciously. In measured rational ways, learners made citizenship gestures toward doing their respective parts in making a pleasant learning community. Their manipulation of the medium was functional, organized, time-driven, and carefully evaluated. Its personality was manifested as much by silences and spaces as it was by conversation.

Learners told stories of intrigue, conflict, and anxiety that grew out of the need for sustained, interactive, online co-existence. They told stories in which they tried, in most cases, to move with grace and dignity around issues of personality and the resultant frictions that they had witnessed or experienced in their online learning environments. As was also the case in their online lives, their recounting of those lives often spoke with spaces as well as words. Long pauses, ums, uhs, and restarted sentences were often the results of participants' attempts to afford as much civility and latitude as possible to the behaviour of others. Soft chuckles and wry laughter often accompanied such stories, as speakers gazed into space, or pondered the floor, while struggling for the right words.

What their stories told me, through their words and around their spaces, was that their online behaviours were designed to exhibit parallel levels of tolerance, etiquette, and gracefulness. This was not always true, as most things are not always true, but, among the learners I talked to, it was mostly true. They also recounted stories of their interactions with other learners that reiterated the truth of what they were telling me, and what I was hearing from them.

How can we understand the existence of this veneer of etiquette in online learning, when the facelessness of virtual reality can and does lead, in other venues, to abusive and careless behaviours online (Jacobson, 2001)? And what is the relationship of this platform of carefully maintained etiquette to participation patterns? Learners raised the same questions. When speaking of levels of silences within two different groups, Sarah speculated: "I wasn't sure whether that was because it was the second course, and in the first course they were kind of waiting and seeing whether, if you said something wrong, someone would attack you, and they're more comfortable now."

For me, as a teacher and an adult educator, this part of the study yielded fascinating results. I have worked in the adult classroom for years, passing through the learning careers of hundreds of learners. In my experience with the classroom dynamic – which includes teaching about it as well as practicing it and also writing about it – the phenomenon of learner etiquette has never materialized beyond discussions of how instructors could create safe, trusting classrooms and how learners should observe the "rules of the classroom" in order to safeguard the climate of trust that had been created (Poonwassie, 2001; Renner, 1993).

Possible reasons to help explain the state of that situation include: a) We have been socially-conditioned for an entire lifetime on behavioural issues that govern classroom and studentship behaviours, b) dynamics are mitigated by the physicality of others' presence, c) dynamics are further mitigated, in some cases actually controlled, by the physicality of an instructional presence, d) if classroom dynamics are truly uncomfortable for students, they will absent themselves, either temporarily or permanently, and e) bricks-and-mortar learning environments afford "hiding places" that foster the diffusion of tensions and negativities – coffee breaks, changes of pace, new topics, re-shuffled groups, and of course, interventions from instructors (or other watchful learners) who are scanning the group for non-verbal clues among members. Taken together, these options create a sense of porousness in face-to-face learning that does not exist in online learning, in spite of the deceiving façade of "distance." Ironically, within the learning compound to which online courses are analogous, there is no distance: you cannot run *and* you cannot hide. Online life is a fishbowl existence.

The first level at which learners demonstrated their awareness of their captivity, and its effects, addressed the archival nature of this type of computer-mediated communication and was labelled "permanence." I was surprised by how many learners indicated a sense of caution and wariness about what they committed, in writing, to their course websites. The fact that their words were going into what they perceived to be a public and permanent place gave pause to many. They adapted to this caveat in several ways. Many constructed their responses slowly and deliberately in a word processing file and then pasted them into the conferencing platform. At least one learner used this mechanism as a self-constraining time-out, where he would "buy time" by expressing his thoughts in a Word document, leaving the piece for a while, and then returning to it later to see how he felt about it before deciding to post it or not.

More often, learners self-edited their writing to prevent themselves from making statements that would incur wrath, create conflict, or cause outrage among their peers. Even those respondents who indicated that they liked to "stir things up" were cognizant and respectful of how far they could go without crossing the line. And *everybody* knew who the habitual offenders were within the larger cohort group – although there were really only a couple of learners who were targeted consistently as not adhering to the unspoken etiquette. (Many reasons were forwarded to explain the worst offender's behaviours.)

This study asked questions of learners that brought to the fore the decision-making processes that guided their participation in online learning activities. Of those behaviours, perhaps the most consistent and most strongly expressed affective behaviour was the avoidance of conflict online. As Anne pointed out, "You have to work with these people," implying that she felt that there was no escape if one were to succeed in the learning enterprise by completing the course. Like most of the other learners in my study, she felt that the participation grade sanctioned and rewarded presence. In fact, learners commented at length on the fairness and the implementation strategies of participation grades, some going as far as to outline new systems that they felt would be fairer to them.

Online learning often brings strangers together in a contrived environment that is premised on the fact of them interacting successfully and productively with each other over a period of time. Unlike face-to-face environments, where potential conflicts are often mitigated by long-practiced social niceties, the configuration of online learning can lead instead, if not managed carefully, to misunderstandings created both through the use of words and the silences between them. Given the unyielding fishbowl of the online classroom, conflict became extremely undesirable. One of the ways that learners perceived that they could "keep things nice" was to engage in levels of social niceties that contributed to a sense of group togetherness, or community. Most of the study's participants understood that this was a part of their role as group members and were willing to participate to this end to varying degrees. However, responsibility for negotiating conflict was only absorbed by them, as learners, to a certain degree. In other words, once etiquette had been breached, damage control became necessary, and that was perceived to be a role for the instructor (Anderson et al., 2001). During my interviews, learners levelled many criticisms at instructors when learners felt that some members of the group had been allowed to "bash" other students publicly. High marks were given to instructors who stepped in to such frays with appropriate means at appropriate times, although the delicacy of those situations was well understood by learners. In describing one such situation, Andy knew that "it was probably [the instructor's] role to say that [the student's behaviour] wasn't very productive ... let's just talk about something else." Even so, Andy noted that this reprimand caused the student at the heart of the controversy to exhibit "an injured kind of tone when he writes now, even in the next course."

When conflict occurred online, most learners adopted silence, at least in the public sphere. Alternately, one learner noted this tendency: "I've noticed that if there's an exaggerated politeness in the forums, it means that there's some rancor there." Privately, at such times, a parallel stream of exchanges existed between learners who felt kinship with each other. Some of these relationships had been formed in the initial face-to-face meeting; some had developed online due to similar interests, experiences, and backgrounds; some had evolved from close interaction in group project assignments. In the private fora, learners would discuss the situation at hand and comment to each other about the particular behaviours being exhibited. Sometimes the distasteful attention-getting behaviours were those of students; sometimes of instructors.

The data provided by my learners spoke directly, and in opposition to, studies that "found no evidence of off-task activity among students" (Curtis & Lawson, 2001) and studies that identified low levels of such activities but deemed them unimportant or "unproductive" (Curtis & Lawson, 2001). Curtis and Lawson (2001), however, did acknowledge that they suspected "that such utterances have an important social function in enabling learning interactions."

Learners' participation choices were often guided by the undercurrents created by their expressed preference for calm and harmony online. Learners would invest energy in tending to the feelings of "injured" comrades. When I asked one learner how he addressed another's noticeable poutiness online, he replied: "I just say, 'Oh, good work,' or whatever, and I make little short comments. I try not to blabber unless I really have something to say." Generally speaking, the group's sense of "netiquette" was very well developed.

As another testimony to the uniqueness of online adult learning environments, a fully online text outlining a guide to "netiquette" (Shea, 2002) did not address online learning but rather occupied itself more with "exciting" aspects of Internet life –

romance, flaming, security, abuse, pornography. The few references to learning were discussions of rules for school-aged children aimed at young people participating in virtual schooling. Among other things, my study revealed the pronounced need for more mature and subtle understandings of the complexities of online dynamics that fall into the “netiquette’ category.

In an ironic twist in learners’ relationship with community, another phenomenon occurred in online learning with some learners, at different times, and to some degree. Transformative learning is described as learning that “is based on reflection and on the interpretation of the experiences, ideas, and assumptions gained through prior learning” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 129). Based on the work of Mezirow and incorporating notions of double-loop and triple-loop learning into the mix of learners’ reflections, transformative learning “bends back” on itself to call into question learners’ long-held assumptions, underlying beliefs and perspectives. “It is a vibrant, dynamic process that is typically not completed when a course ends” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 130). At one level, transformative learning is a serendipitous outcome to education’s more content-related lists of learning outcomes; at another, higher level, in some philosophies (Daloz, 1986; Mezirow, 1990), it could be understood to be a goal of all adult learning.

Learners in my study asked themselves, “What am I learning about learning in this medium?” and, “What am I learning about my learning and myself as I experience this process?” That they underwent self-reflection was evident in the length and depth of their careful answers to my questions. Whereas there were some courses in their program of study that were designed to specifically approach and generate these types of thoughts, my learners indicated that they came to these thoughts meta-cognitively as results of the dissonance evoked by their online experiences, created within their online community, or generated by the mix of conditions that defined their own social presence.

Only one learner in my study identified her "learning about her learning" in those terms although several others alluded in less direct ways to the fact that they had been thinking about the effects of their learning styles on their participation. I did not glean from them a sense that their experiences had changed their worlds or their senses of themselves. Rather, their extended knowledge about themselves and their capabilities remained grounded in a pragmatic sense of efficiency at having tackled, persevered, and conquered a formidable challenge – the world of online learning.

In so doing, learners brought both respect and restraint to the formation and maintenance of online community. With attentiveness to the well-being of their group, and envisioning in a practical sense their roles as stakeholders within that milieu, they moved cautiously and responsibly in negotiating the creation of community.

Online "Being" as Social Presence

In this study, through the central research question, I sought learners' stories to add dimension to the notion of social presence, "the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of enquiry" (Rourke et al., 1999, p. 50). How do learners shape the being that they bring to community? Which tangents do learners' decisions fall along as they balance the tension between life and learning? Three major models put forward over the years will provide another referent to the study's findings – Moore's (1989) construction of relationships among learner, instructor, and content; Garrison's (1989) construction of the relationships of power, control, and responsibility; and Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) recent community of enquiry model.

In 1989, Garrison outlined a framework for considering the balance of teaching-learning transactions in distance learning. He looked at the distance learning dynamic in terms of balance and power. What did the notion of "control" mean to the learners in my study? Could the notion of control help in understanding the patterns of learners' participation or the formation of their sense of social presence? Candy's (1991) encompassing discussion on control helps to illuminate this issue since, "if one attempts to answer the question "Learner-control of what?" it soon becomes apparent that learner-control is a multidimensional entity" (p. 207). Candy cited Boud and Bridge's (1974) work which identified four learner-control dimensions: pace (times and places that learners learn); choice (means by which to learn or choosing parts of the course to study); method (selecting ways in which to learn and materials to use); and content (choosing what to learn according to learners' interests and needs).

Control of what? The issue of learner-control has never been "a single, unitary concept, but rather a continuum along which various instructional situations may be placed" (Candy, 1991, p. 205). In the virtual teaching-learning environment, the already-complex issue of learner-control assumed a different shape from its traditional bricks-and-mortar presence. In an apparent trade-off, learners were deemed to have gained flexibility through the asynchronous nature of the communications medium – captured by Boud and Bridge's (1974) dimension of pace. In theory, learners agreed to forsake sociability and the comfort of face-to-face interactions for control of their learning schedules. The reality was not quite so. On the one hand, sociability continued to exist:

witness many of the learners in this study who found that there was too much social interaction attached to their coursework. And on the other, more sobering hand, learners did not gain much flexibility beyond not having to attend face-to-face classes. Recall Rich and Rachel's comments in which they both concluded that they could have learned more easily, with less "fuss," if a traditional classroom setting had been a viable option. Paradoxical? A bit.

On the issues of flexibility and learner control, learners were tied to a demanding fishbowl life through online learning. In this program their curriculum was usually pre-set and did not offer the porousness of a traditional classroom where intense interaction could be mediated at any instant by jokes or a change of activity. The level of demand was constant from the start of the course to the finish; it was a quicksand for conscientious learners to fall into. Control was no longer the issue. I argue that these learners have ceded control in online learning venues for the one element that was necessary to suit their busy adult lives: the luxury of not having to attend formalized instructional events. Constancy has replaced control as the relationship axis of online learning.

The paradigmatic shift of the learning framework also invokes Moore's (1989) learner-learner, learner-content, learner-instructor typology. On the face of it, Moore's three categories of interaction still contain the essence of exchange in online learning environments. The elaboration by Anderson and Garrison (1998) of Moore's three interactive states into six did not alter, or add to, the integrity of the dynamic. However, following the thread of the reasoning used in aligning old models with newer realities, the unspoken, unnamed interaction that has emerged, and whose story is told in this study, is "learner-self" negotiation. Key to the success of both courses and individuals' progress in courses, learners' interactions with their "selfness" – manifested by the many facets of their lives, social milieus and learning idiosyncrasies – shape the relevance of ways of thinking about the online educational exchange (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

Garrison and Archer's (2000) community of enquiry model "capitalizes on the ease and abundance of interaction with media such as computer conferencing" (Rourke et al., 1999). The development of this model reflected a major shift in the framework of teaching-learning activities enacted at a distance that use – in the case of this study – a Web-based, text-based communications system. The model has swollen to incorporate the tenets of social learning theory (Wenger, 1998) that brings to learners' educational experiences a rich panoply of contexts. During the decade or so of those intervening years, the movement of learning into cyberspace and the studies that followed it recognized the constructivist pull of learners' life experiences on their social fabric (Jonassen, 1992; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Wenger, 1998) – the "practices, routines, rituals, artifacts, symbols, conventions, stories and histories" (Wenger, 1998, p. 6) that layered their cognitive attentiveness to learning.

"The maintenance of a dynamic educational balance among issues of control (management), responsibility (monitoring) and persistence (motivation) is realized through sustained communication" (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p. 3). Sustained communication – the community of enquiry – is nurtured, shaped, and instigated by learners' responses to the demands of their own lives, to each other, to the content, and to instructional presence through "abundant" interactive, participative rhythms.

Participation and communication and the learning that ensued from that iterative process were dampened at times, constricted at times, and flurried at times when learners' rhythms were knocked askew by pragmatic life issues or course issues. Within their learning, learners attributed peaks and valleys in participation to online tension, impatience with the quality of discussion topics, mismanagement on the part of instructors, and the need for learners to "acquire" a participation grade. Prior to the point of engagement in their learning, and affecting their decisions to engage, learners' studies were affected on the homefront by family illnesses, holidays, computer problems, and of course, the stresses and demands of the workplace.

Garrison et al.'s community of enquiry model identified teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence – the largest presence (Anderson et al., 2001) – as its constituent parts. In the model, the presences sit as overlapping circles, describing, in compass fashion, "educational experience" at their core. Within social presence, Garrison et. al have identified its components that describe learners' affective behaviours as they engage in cognitive interactions. Understanding these behaviorisms are useful in explaining the layers of interactivity and connectedness that characterize online learning (Burge, 1994; Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Eastmond, 1995) within the confines of the community of enquiry. While it is not the intention of this study to redesign this model or others, I suggest that the experiences of the learners in my study tipped the scale towards a larger, more pervasive social presence than Garrison et al.'s model acknowledged. I suggest that an important dimension of social presence exists outside and precedes the definition of community of enquiry, and that the decision-making acts of choice that learners must negotiate with themselves, their peers, their families, their professional and personal environments are important contributors to the creation of social presence and to "the consequent salience of [learners'] interpersonal interactions" (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976, p. 76). Before learners' online actions can be measured and understood in terms of expression, communication, and cohesion, their decisions to participate in activities must be understood in terms of a foundation of balanced tensions, judiciously calculated and managed. While useful for its "internal" explication of exhibited behaviours, Garrison et al.'s social presence model does not reflect a comparable recognition of "external" conditions. In their creation of social presence, this study's learners demonstrated the challenges of online learning (Burge, 1994; Postman; 1992) that arise as "individuals seek to maintain identity and to be more responsible (ethical), effective (competent and cooperative), and autonomous (inter and independent) within these communities" (Bitterman, 2000).

Summary

Learners responding to the questions that I asked them about the nature of their participatory activities in online learning told stories that revealed complex social interaction processes to be part of the "communicative practices of web-mediated collaborative learning" (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000). The negotiated rhythms of learners' commitment to interactions balanced a number of potential tensions that could, at first glance, appear contradictory. So, too, the virtual learning space presented competing synergies: it was without time and space restrictions and yet demanded and thrived on allegiance, attention, immediacy and constancy. Learners appreciated its flexibility but begrudged it its unwieldiness; learners brought their energies to the medium while at the same time protecting that energy from the never-ending demands of the medium; they donated to the creation of community goodwill and trust but measured their generosity against the pragmatic pressures placed on them by their real lives.

In Chapter Five, I addressed thematically the meaning drawn from learners' stories that I categorized and presented in Chapter Four. The three themes that emerged were: a) the functionality of learners' engagement in online learning activities; b) online community, respected yet frustrating; c) online "being" as social presence.

The last chapter, Chapter Six, contains a summary of the study, its process and its findings; applications of those findings into both practice and future research; and a concluding section where my own reflections reconcile the energies that initiated and guided this research with the study's findings.

Chapter Six

Summary, Questions for Practice, Implications for Research, Reflections

From the findings of this study and the themes that arose from analysing the study's data, there spring the beginnings of further exploration into learners' online experiences. In this section, I outline implications for practice and questions for future research.. But to get there, first, I provide here a summary of what has happened already. A discussion of questions for future practice and implications for research follows. The last words in this last section belong to my reflections, where, inspired by this work, I was able to find some new meaning in my own past experiences.

Summary

A student in my own program remarked to me recently, while discussing her choice of a project topic, that online learning was painted far more rosily than she and her peers had decided it really was. Interestingly, the topic she was suggesting was really about social presence, about manoeuvring through what Melville termed, in *Moby Dick*, the "little lower layer," although she initially framed it in terms of providing more direction and assistance for online learners.

In this study, I explored how learners perceived themselves as participants in online learning activities. I asked what factors prompted them to make the decisions that they did – decisions that manifest quantitatively as "many postings," or silence, or boycotts, or cliques, to name a few of descriptors of types and numbers of learners' responses (Brown, 2001; Rourke et al., 1999; Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000).

This study was driven by my desire to put "a human face" – in the form of learners' experiences – on other quantitative data that told stories numerically and to answer some of the questions raised in recent relevant qualitative studies (Bullen, 1998; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000). In this study, I drew on literature that has contributed to our evolving understanding of online learning. Topic areas included adult learning, distance learning, social presence, community, and participation in online learning. That research provided framework for my inquiry; its spaces invited further investigation; its findings suggested further development (Bullen, 1998; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998; Rourke at al., 1999; Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000; Wegerif, 1998). As a member of the distance education community, my curiosity was piqued both by my practice and by previous contributions to the field. My intention through my own study was to contribute new knowledge to the field that would, in turn, inform practice.

Using purposeful selection, I approached a number of mid-life adult professional learners engaged in a program of online learning and ultimately interviewed seven learners in lengthy, semi-structured discussions which occurred, for the most part, in their own learning environments. My travelling to their environments was designed to build upon the rapport and trust had already been established with these learners through a previous teaching-learning connection.

I had asked participants to reflect on their learning experiences prior to the interview. In the interviews, participants contributed varying degrees of comfortable, peripheral "learning talk" over coffee, while we established the interview scenario prior to beginning the interviews. Following my transcription of the data, I manually coded, classified, and chunked them into topics and categories and then eventually drew out several major themes. Copies of the transcribed data, in which I asked for correction, comment, or elaboration, were sent back to participants. I continued to apprise participants of my progress by email, and I eventually sent the display of data to them in hardcopy for their perusal. I incorporated resultant conversations and considerations into the text.

From the data that I gathered, I organized the many smaller areas of topic interest that participants had shared with me in response to my questions into large-topic categories and presented these in the discussion of the study's findings. These are the three large areas of discussion that resulted: influences on online learners' engagement in learning activities; demonstrations of social presence and community; and the importance of the instructional role.

Working with the larger categories, I then drew out three major themes a) the functionality of learners' engagement in online learning activities; b) online community, respected yet frustrating; c) online "being" as social presence.

My data indicated that online learners worked hard to build and continuously negotiate community while engaged in online learning. Their devotion to harmony and equilibrium was due in part to a program delivery model that bonded them together as learners over the life of their program and that required certain levels of interactive participation from them. Learners' participation choices were formed by, and in turn *formed*, a type of negotiated structured, functional community that differed from other types of virtual community.

Learners' silences were as important a feature of online learning community as were their contributions. Silences and spaces highlighted learners' notions of "captive presence" and etiquette and introduced the nether issues of conflict and functionality that beat like engines beneath the surface of participation.

My findings, as do the findings of other recent studies with online learners (Brown, 2001; Bullen, 1998; Burge, 1994; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2000; Vrasidas & McIsaac, 2001), indicate the closely interrelated nature of the parts of the online teaching dynamic where variations in conditions– program model, level of study – alter the resultant data and their applicability to other situations. Such demonstrated fluidity of condition reinforces the delicacy of the tension in the online learning mix.

Questions for Practice

"Once a human being has arrived on this earth, *communication is the largest single-factor determining what kinds of relationships she or he makes with others and what happens to each in the world*" (author's italics, cited in Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000, p. iii). The evolution to online delivery of programs by degree-granting institutions has provided expanded access to potential students while offering educators and researchers opportunities to re-examine the dynamics of the communications relationships in teaching-learning processes. In this study, my learners' stories afforded me a comprehensive glimpse into the layers that exist beneath our publicly-demonstrated choices. I sought from the inception of this research to hear learners' stories of "little things" that I believed from my own history as teacher and learner form seminal pieces in learners' journeys. Their stories told me things that I did not know. Their stories have provided insights to me that I hope will contribute to our emerging field of knowledge. As an administrator and scholar who provides online program opportunities, I am cognizant of the impact that some of my findings will have "on the job." I will discuss questions for future practice that have arisen from the findings of this study under the rubric of three sets of issues: design, program delivery, and orientation of instructors and learners to online learning.

Design issues: if you build it, will they learn?

In programs that follow the constructivist, adult education-driven principles espoused by mainstream thinkers such as Dewey (1938), Lindeman (1926) and Candy 1991), the notion of "encouraging students to assume responsibility to construct meaning for themselves " (Garrison & Archer, 2000) is well accepted. Subsequent understandings of instructional roles, issues of power and control, and the honoring of learners' experiences play into both course design features and into appropriate instructional management styles. The findings of this study endorse the collaborative construction of knowledge among learners and instructor (Jonassen, 1992; Kanuka & Anderson, 1998). However, even in well-designed learning experiences attuned to constructivist ideals where activity is equated with learning and faith is placed in students to create their own learning (Garrison & Archer, 2000), the issue of knowledge construction is affected by this study's findings. Learners in this study told me that they decided to open messages from other students based on the length of those messages or on whether or not messages contained attachments or on how many postings they felt they needed to dispatch with on that particular day in order to feel caught up or to "clear the board." Learners in this study told me that they avoided particular messages altogether if the writer of the message had a history of being off-topic, unpleasant, or in some other way offended the reader. If a message arrived too late in the order of things within a discussion, some learners deemed it not worthy of opening or considered it redundant. As learners moved to the beat of their own particular rhythms and timeframes, their decisions to “move on” at times rendered information arriving on the website superfluous, regardless of its cognitive merit.

Effective practice, therefore, could benefit from adopting a much more pragmatic view of creating online learning experiences in order to foster, to optimal degrees, advanced levels of activities to contribute to critical thinking (Kanuka, 2002). Providers’ assumptions of critically-acceptable levels of content in courses, of constructivist pedagogies and of appropriate and dedicated instruction do not by themselves ensure that learners’ course energies result in the outcomes desired by course designers and instructors.

Are more stringent deadlines within the structure of course activities the answer? Are limits on the lengths of messages the answer? Many learners in this study commented that they chose the times and places of their responses according to the length of the initial message. Whatever design features are incorporated into online courses, those responsible for curriculum development should, with a realistic nod to the constraints that learners place on their own levels of participations, restrain from creating activities that invite or expect every class member to respond to a certain project or posting written either by the instructor or by other students. Learners told repeatedly of the “avalanche” of response postings that this type of design evoked. They found that these exercises were overwhelming in volume, and their responses to those situations were to ignore the resultant postings, thereby missed out on whatever cognitive stimulation they might have offered. Also, at the affective level, learners moved a little further down the path of irritation that, in some cases, eventually soured their entire view of a particular course.

Another design feature that could be more consciously attended to involves integrating the course's ongoing online expectations – specifically learning activities that foster online discussion – with course assignments that exist in a parallel world but still form a part of learners' responsibility to the course. Learners in this study indicated strongly that they measured their available course time judiciously. The structure of online courses demands that learners attend to their coursework almost daily; a day or so away from the computer spells disaster when huge numbers of postings require catching up on. Some learners, like Marie, became resigned to never "clearing the board." When assignments fall due at the same time as online deadlines for completing learning tasks, learners must make choices between which tasks to attend to. Their willingness to contribute and invest resources into the course is finite.

The learners in my study had a lot to say about the existence of participation marks in their online courses. It seemed that many learners did not understand whatever concepts were underpinning the allocation of participation marks in particular courses. The data revealed many incidents where learners recounted, using numbers of postings to illustrate their points, examples of participation levels as they questioned the participation marks that had been subsequently awarded. It was clear that the presence of participation marks motivated learners in this study to participate although for each learner who described what he or she did in order to "earn" participation marks, another learner expressed criticism of colleagues' tactics in this area. In order to prevent the speculation and resultant unhappiness that many learners exhibited in response to ill-defined participation marks, and in order to prevent the devastating avalanches of participation-motivated postings that many learners reported, our practice might benefit from looking again at how this feature of online learning is implemented, explained, and conducted.

Can we better prepare learners and instructors for online learning?

The learners in my study commented at times on issues of meta-cognition, of learning about their learning. The introduction of new ways of learning to them had given some of them pause for thought.

There are two levels on which to think about preparing learners for online learning. The first level is technical in nature – teaching learners to use the technologies. The learners in my study were all experienced online learners. Perhaps because of this, or perhaps because their program was delivered entirely online, or perhaps because the technology used was not very complicated, I did not hear many complaints from the learners in my study about the difficulties in becoming acclimatized to the technicalities of learning online. Other literature revealed that other kinds of delivery models and other kinds of software gave learners' some technical difficulties (Brown, 2001; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Vrasidas & McIssac, 2000).

The second, more complex type of preparation for online learning experiences could involve presenting meta-cognitive strategies that would alert them to thinking about their own learning in new and challenging ways. To that end, understanding learners' patterns of responses – as was sought in this study – might offer insight to a number of the processes that we enact as designers, teachers, and administrators. The information by which we educate, orient and familiarize novice learners to their impending online experiences could more fully relate anecdotally the stories of others in order to pragmatically introduce new sets of realities. Brown (2001) spoke of "foregrounding" as an aid to preparing students for online learning experiences by introducing such concepts as "What is online community? How is it achieved?" She concluded that "Early discussion of community and its potential benefits may create a perceived need that students will then want to fill. Certainly the discussion will convey that community is a course expectation so students will work to meet it" (Brown, 2001). In this study, the data illustrated that, indeed, students *did* work to respond to their sense of community, although in measured and sometimes minimal ways.

Similarly, the stories told by my learners may help educators to move past idealized situations of endless "virtual" possibilities and alert instructors to some very real limitations that will affect, and potentially compromise, their instructional effectiveness in online learning venues. Learners' recollections of instructional behaviours indicate that many different types of information are necessary to assist new instructors in this steep but critical transition to online teaching and learning formats.

This study's findings suggest that new instructors should be oriented fully to their roles not only as "teachers" and content experts, which is perhaps how they first think of themselves when coming from more traditional teaching environments, but also to their online roles as facilitators, road-mappers, and guides. They could be made aware of the critical importance of their first messages to the group. Appropriate, clear, and concise instructions from instructors can help to allay learners' anxieties and questions at course start-up and the resultant collective sense of ease will allow responses pertaining to the actual content, rather than to the mechanics of process, to flow. At the same time, instructors should be alerted to their roles in maintaining the sense of order that the learners in this study indicated was an instructional responsibility so that learners don't boycott the course if it becomes contentious and unpleasant. Correspondingly, instructors could be coached to scan course environments for the signs of absences and silences that may indicate that something is wrong, and that the intended learning is not occurring because learners' energies are being expended dealing with the social dimensions of the group's dynamics. Learners in my study indicated that undercurrents of tension are continually communicated privately among learners outside the courses' public fora.

What are the effects of differing models of program delivery?

Many learners stated firmly their appreciation of the opportunity to meet their class colleagues in introductory face-to-face sessions. Many who had traveled considerable distances to attend such face-to-face sessions indicated that it had been well worth their while. Several indicated that closer kinships had formed among those learners who had grouped together or had at least become aware of each other by putting faces to names at the face-to-face sessions. The social touchstone for many learners, recounting different intra-group dynamics within courses, seemed to be the face-to-face meeting.

Distance educators recognize the impact of this dimension of learning and respect the visual dimension of learning for its importance and impact on learners' perceptions. Many distance programs attempt to replicate a sense of face-to-faceness by placing pictures of class members on course websites. Still, once again, the findings of this study emphasize that programs that include some sorts of face-to-face meetings for their students are providing them with a source of strength that cannot be replicated in other ways. The bonding that occurred on those occasions continued to manifest through learners' choosing to respond to preferred messages based on the physical recollections of the person who wrote the message.

Management of the program and the cohort is important in other ways. Learners spoke several times about the confusion that resulted when new members joined a cohort group that was already underway. New learners' desperate attempts to "ramp up" to the levels of expertise – both cognitive and technical – that were demonstrated by seasoned members of the group resulted in flurries of postings that often chagrined the more experienced members of the group. When those activity spikes appeared, group members, overwhelmed by the volumes of new messages usually unrelated to the work at hand, were forced again to critically choose among messages to open and respond to. Those who proceeded in a sequential unbiased order had to spend more time to get through the copious listings. Those who used other sorting mechanisms needed to apply more time to the sorting process. *All* were disgruntled at the perceived "set back" in course progress while the group re-normed and formed around the arrival of new group members. In a quantitative sense, each time group members had to spend time tending to social issues, or to quelling flurries in the affective domain, many learners – using their time deliberately and frugally – absented themselves from other online learning tasks.

Implications for Research

I became aware of several areas that I thought warranted future research from both the data from this study and from discussions with the study's participants at various times during the collection process or after their reviewing of the initial data display.

Studies of changes over time

This study was not designed to study learners longitudinally over the tenure of their programs. Such a study would capture a different range of data that could contribute valuable information to expand this study's findings. Based on many of the "edges" revealed by the current data, I have begun such a study with a cohort of online learners who will learn together in their program for a minimum of two years. The study will hopefully answer some of the questions raised by this study's participants. It will address learners' perceptions of changes over time in their relationship to online community as well as attempt to identify factors that mark identifiable patterns in the rhythm of sustained online learning.

The study of changes over time would be especially telling for cohort-based distance programs as groups are subject to immense pressure during their studies together in terms both of their community participation and of their own sense of social presence. It would also be useful to superimpose the rhythms of typical face-to-face program progression, from the initial enthusiastic "honeymoon" period, through mid-program stresses and disillusionments, to learners' end-states of relief or reflective satisfaction onto online course flow.

Group dynamics online

Another area of interest, for future research, given remarks made by this study's participants, could involve the impact of small group formation on the personality of the larger group. Several respondents indicated that they had purposefully expended more time and energy, in the sense of community-building, on their relationships within smaller groups that had been formed in response to group assignments than they had in the larger, whole-class group. Does early group formation of these types splinter the integrity of the whole group such that participation throughout the remainder of the course is skewed in favour of those sets of small groups? On the other hand, if good community-building has existed throughout the life of the entire online group, and small groups are formed toward the end of the course, will participants devote sufficient energy and goodwill to the work that is required of those small groups when it might remove them from the comfortable venue of the larger whole? Learners are of mixed opinions about online group work – many declaring it too difficult and labour-intensive. When does group work function most optimally? Is it too frenetic to re-group learners during the life of a course? Are the additional opportunities afforded by working closely with other group members offset by the energies required to re-establish effective working groups?

The role of the instructor

Future research could also continue to investigate the role of the online instructor in several specific regards. Do learners' expectations of instructors change significantly over the duration of the course? Or do learners' expectations of instructors evolve over the duration of a program? The effects of this knowledge would inform the staffing of online programs considerably and perhaps open the possibilities of teaching online more broadly to include talented faculty who do not believe that they have the skills or the time to devote to teaching in an online program.

How vocal and "present" should instructors be within online discussions? The learners in this study were critical of instructors' silences, citing reasons that ranged from instructors' withholding knowledge to simply not providing adequate reinforcement and course management information. Learners noted that there had been a great deal of variation between instructional styles. Recognizing that learning styles are varied and plentiful, future researchers could further explore the variables that we already understand to be critical in student-instructor interaction (Bullen, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

Undergraduate versus graduate learning: do the data apply?

In this study, I explored undergraduate learners' experiences in online courses. Although the learners were all adult professionals, they were non-degree holders with the exception of one participant. How did their experiences differ from the types of experiences that might have been related by similar professional adults enrolled in online graduate studies? Could the assumption be made that doctoral students, for example, are more impassioned about their studies and therefore more homogenously absorbed by the content of their studies? Palloff and Pratt (1999) reported a high level of commitment to the doctoral seminar that formed their community laboratory. But Brown's (2001) study of an online doctoral administration program reported that nine out of 21 participants felt either no sense of community or were inconclusive in their community-related comments.

The factors determining participation, interaction, and resultant community are as twisted and interwoven as a thick braid. Course level, model of delivery, timeframe, and quality of instruction – all institutional factors – represent only one axis along which online dynamics can be understood. Another less controllable, less predictable and perhaps more volatile set of factors resides in the lives and hearts of the learners themselves, are brought to the learning enterprise in the form of social presence, and manifest in levels of community, collaboration, and participation.

Do the models hold?

Garrison and Archer proposed a "teaching and learning transaction" model based on "an *ideal* [authors' italics] learning situation" (2000, p. 4). Theirs is an example of models put forward that rest, to date, on theoretical data drawn from face-to-face understandings of adult learning environments, on quantitative studies measuring aspects of online learners' behaviours through transcript analyses (Rourke, et al., 2000), or on isolated studies of small groups behaving in certain ways for short periods of time (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Garrison and Archer's model theoretically incorporated each aspect of what our research has come to understand and accept as aspects of online learning. But recent research has questioned aspects of the processes of critical thinking and self-directed learning (Bullen, 1998; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000b; Kanuka, 2002). This study's data shed more light on learners' sense of self-direction. Similarly, each eventual variation in our understanding of front-line processes should initiate renewed examination of the relationship of learning conditions to each other and to their resultant processes and ultimately to the broad foundations of online teaching and learning – constructivism and collaboration. Future research studies outlined here would contribute to informing the ongoing scrutiny that keeps our knowledge base critically responsive, fresh, and applicable to responsible practice.

Reflections

It is odd to come to the end of a work that has been in front of you for so long. It is odder, perhaps, to realize that there really was both reason and logic in what you initially planned to do. Oddest of all is that moment of reconciliation, when having passed through the hottest part of the flame, one stands back, still shaken but safe now, in a cooler, calmer place, and enjoys, for fleeting moments, some sense of the journey. Having flung the stone into the pond and watched it disappear from view, I remember now what it looked like and how it felt in my hand. I remember the energy and excitement of its arc. But how could I have known the pattern of the ripples that it would engender?

It's gratifying that a structure as formal as this one allowed me the opportunity to align the ripples in my research, my life and my work. I was, at the time of this work's inception, very much a part of the landscape that I sought to understand. The oxymoron of developing distance programs as I wrote through my research experience, to me, parallels the tension that the learners in my study indicated existed for them between bringing themselves into community and keeping parts of themselves back from community in that they might retain their own individuality and control of their lives.

Like the learners in my study, I see, in hindsight, hints of passion and romance that defined my decisions to move from who I was then to who I am now. As for them, the fuel that sparked the journey was learning – the promise of a world of untold excitement and unlimited potential. As with their journeys, optimism is tempered by reality as the goal nears.

In these moments of reconciliation, in this time of taking stock, I see the distance learning enterprise in a new light. In the style of Steier (1991), I bent back once again to reframe; in the words of Conle (1996), the story reverberated and called "forth another in an echo-like fashion"(p. 301).Two anecdotes from the past come to mind. Both are important to the meaning-making of this experience.

The first is a story from the mid-eighties when I was a distance student myself, enrolled in a university credential program while teaching college in a remote centre. The program was distance delivered of a fashion: weekly teleconferences were interpersed with professors' monthly visits to our college's main campus. I began the program with a colleague but he dropped out early in the program. I was terrified of having to make the lonely drive by myself to Fairview along narrow, snow-packed roads, in the dark. On the more-frequent teleconferenced occasions, I sat by myself in our campus's staff room, hooked up by phone lines to fellow learners and instructor.

Looking back, I see the extent of my ambition in taking on my first adult education training in that way. It took me three years to complete the credential. My learning life, organized around scheduling issues and the demands of my life and family, was dually coloured by the compelling personal and professional need to achieve the credential and the constant fear of unforeseen exigencies interrupting it. This was the framework that directed me as learner; it is, to some degree, the same framework that I heard behind the stories of the learners in my study: functionality, accountability, and competition.

The second anecdote from my past is more recent. I was managing a program of adult education study in collaboration with four other western universities. Ours was the flagship program – the largest, most populated, and most innovative – and we ran, at one time, two streams of delivery, face-to-face and correspondence; and, at others, three – face-to-face, correspondence, and teleconferencing (later evolving into computer-mediated delivery). At the consortium meetings where I would join my colleagues to plan, discuss and evaluate strategy, I was the only member who brought forth what I perceived to be a major weakness in the program. My complaint echoed those of many of our face-to-face learners: too much overlap in the core created redundancy in the classroom. Learners wanted a streamlined curriculum that spent less time in circles and more time encompassing other topics. To my frustration, my colleagues did not understand the nature of my concern because they did not receive similar feedback from their students.

I pondered this incongruency for quite some time before I understood the situation. Their programs were smaller than ours and were primarily distance-based, using the correspondence model. From watching my own correspondence students' behaviours and regarding their feedback relative to our much more populous face-to-face offerings, I became aware of the fact that the devil was in the distance detail: when given their own learning space, distance learners took liberties with material – liberties that precluded redundancy. Unlike face-to-face learners, distance learners' experiences were not mediated by instructors or other students' agendas. As such, their criteria for evaluating their courses rested largely on the expediency of finishing the course and moving forward toward their goal of completing the program.

These learners were motivated to engage in the learning that we provided by their personal and professional needs for accomplishment, not the least consideration being the opportunity to receive a recognized credential from a prestigious university. The functionality that drove these learners shaped their appraisal of course materials as it did their own learning. Distance learners' education was a far more functionally-oriented activity than I realized at the time.

In my own history, functionality meant that I completed my thesis as I worked full-time. The important part of this story for me, when held up against the other two stories that I related, is that I was able, for one year anyway, to absent myself from the daily rhythms of the "other" life and devote myself to rarefied studentship. I see now that the occasion of that year was the time of intellectual passion for me. I was already highly motivated and driven by many pressing needs; failure was not in the cards. But if weather was a metaphor for learning, that year would have been the tempest. Other occasions have been marked by slower, calmer air, a bit hollower perhaps, but still life-sustaining.

Now, at the completion of this study, I am imagining the falling arc of that pebble to the bottom of the bottom of the pond and I am still watching its momentum ripple the glassy surface. What do I make of it all? Philosophically, I believe strongly in connection – spiritually, ontologically, pedagogically. Is there space here for disenchantment?

This research has allowed me to move away from perceiving the educational enterprise through my own eyes. The insights I have gathered through this research have certainly stripped something away from me but I am not mourning the loss. And I see as the outcome an even more robust approach to the work I do, founded on new appreciations of a number of perceptions. What is sobering to me is that, in my past learning lives, I have been the functional, no-frills learner, driving myself – literally and figuratively – towards self-imposed goals that would eventually change my life.

There has always been a place for these kinds of learners and the teachers that support them. What I see now is that the provision of distance learning programs to working professionals must *assume* for them a no-frills stance as part-and-parcel of the decisions that they have made in order to fit this learning into their lives. I see more clearly now where their edges are – as I see in hindsight where mine were. Hopefully, not all of today's self-improving adult learners need to operate on auto-pilot the way I did. For those that do, educators like me will work to improve programs and delivery and contribute to successful learning experiences. I understand with more clarity how contributive a role I can play.

My world has not stood still while I have completed this work and I remain mind-boggled that I have actually finished it. The Irish folksily address our unique foibles as individuals by noting that everyone has his or her own particular gait. Online learning permits the people that I talked to to walk more freely in their own ways, as distance education in more primitive "generations" made it possible for me to find my way. I will remain committed to helping to make that way the *best* way for those who choose that path.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A
Letter of Consent

11452 38 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta
T6J 0L4

December, 2000

Dear [name]

Hello. My name is Dianne Conrad. I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Studies in the Faculty of Education at the University of Alberta. As a part of doctoral degree requirements, I am conducting research for my dissertation. My area of interest is online learning; specifically, I am interested in understanding what influences adult learners' decisions to participate in the activities and dialogue that form the online learning experience.

Your participation in my study will require two things:

- An open-ended interview, about an hour in length, at *your* location. I will tape the interview and later transcribe it and return the transcription to you for your approval. In the interview, I will ask you questions about your online learning experiences. I have included some sample types of questions that I may ask.

(There is a possibility that I may request a shorter, follow-up interview with you. This could be accomplished by telephone.)

- Some note-taking by you, in a journal-type of format, for about 2-4 weeks prior to the interview, in which you write down some of your thoughts about your online learning experiences as you are participating in such a learning process.

Your input and contributions to the study will remain confidential. At no time will you be identified by name, nor will your name be attached to any of the raw data during the research process. If I should use the data for other writings on the same topic, I will exercise the same level of confidentiality.

No one except me will have access to the raw data. It will be stored securely and available only to me. At the conclusion of the study, tapes, transcripts and any notes I will have made will be destroyed.

It is my hope that this research on online learning will provide new and important information about the decision-making process that we, as learners, undergo in order to make our learning experiences successful. The use of the computer as a learning tool, as a business tool, and as an environment for interpersonal transactions is becoming increasingly prevalent in many areas of our adult lives. It will be useful to understand what processes and factors constitute our successful participation in these "virtual" endeavours.

I will require your participation between January 2001 and March 2001. It is my intention to complete the doctoral study by December 2001.

Please indicate your willingness to participate by signing the form where indicated, below. Even after having signed this consent form, you may refuse to answer any of the questions that I ask or you may withdraw from the study at any time, and whatever data I have gathered from your participation will be destroyed.

This study is for the purpose identified and no deception is practised.

If you have any questions about the nature of the research or the data gathering process, or if you would like to discuss it with me, please call me at (780) 492 1501 (work) or (780) 438 9332 (home). My supervisor, Dr. Margaret Haughey, can also be reached at the University of Alberta (492 7609).

Thank you for taking the time to consider my request. Please return your consent form in the self-addressed envelope. You may also fax it to me at (780) 492 0627.

If I don't hear back from you in the next week or so, I will follow up with a telephone call.

Sincerely,

Dianne Conrad

Consent to Participate

As indicated by my signature below, I hereby agree to participate in the study described above. I understand what is required of me, and I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.

Name (print) ________________________________**Date**____________

Signature____

Appendix B
Sample Interview Questions

These are representative of the questions that I asked participants in the taped interviews. In the style of open-ended interviews, I followed the direction that participants established, and introduced questions that probed further into issues that they raised.

- What does “community” mean to you in a learning context?
- How do you contribute to “community-building” online?
- What conditions stimulate your community-building efforts?
- What type of response do you like to see after a community-building effort?
- Whose responsibility is it to create community?
- Describe an instructor’s community-building efforts.
- How have you responded to those efforts?
- What factors influence your decision to respond to online messages?
- When you do feel you’ve said “enough”?
- When you do feel others have said “enough”?
- Do you have a certain physical space that you learn for learning?
- Why have you chosen that space?
- What physical conditions make learning optimal for you?
- What factors determine when you go online?
- What factors determine when you go offline?