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Rural Student Learning Experiences in an Online Composition Course at a 2-Year College

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Dawn A. Goodwin

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2024

Abstract

Rural Student Learning Experiences in an Online Composition Course at a 2-Year

College

by

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MPhil, Walden University, 2023

MA, Southern Hampshire University, 2015

BS, Francis Marion University, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Walden University

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Abstract

Research has revealed that online writing instructors use a variety of instructional methods in class to improve student learning experiences. However, current research has not addressed rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore what, if any, experiences rural students have with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. Siemens and Downes's theory of connectivism was the conceptual framework for this study, which is a learning theory that has been applied to instructional strategies in online courses in the new digital era. A basic qualitative study was employed to collect semistructured interview data from eight students who lived in rural areas when they completed an online composition course at a 2-year college in the Southern United States. Interview data were analyzed and hand coded. Data analysis yielded two themes about rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in the online composition classroom: (a) collaborating with the online composition instructor and students and (b) utilizing technology. Findings contribute to the research on rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in online writing courses at higher education institutions and help fill the gap in the literature about rural students' instructional needs in those courses. This study has the potential for positive social change because instructors and administrators at 2-year colleges could use the results to integrate connectivism into instruction to help improve rural students' class participation and possible completion of their programs, which can improve graduation rates.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Connectivism is a learning theory that has been applied to instructional strategies in online courses in the new digital era (Alzain, 2019; Cleary, 2020; Sozudogru et al., 2019; Xu & Du, 2021). However, students from rural areas have low participation levels in online courses (Welser et al., 2019). This negatively affects their success in class, including first-year writing courses such as Composition I and II, which must be completed for students to earn a degree (Learn.org, 2021). Furthermore, using connectivist strategies in online writing courses helps increase student participation and success (Tham et al., 2021). However, there is a lack of research specific to rural students' experiences with connectivism in online composition courses.

This study focused on rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. The setting was 2-year colleges because rural students are more likely to enroll in 2-year institutions than 4-year institutions (Wells et al., 2023). This study offers the possibility for positive social change because 2-year college administrators and teachers could identify essential classroom practices for addressing the challenges of creating learning environments that support rural students' successful completion of the online composition course, their programs of study, and, ultimately, the college's completion rates.

Chapter 1 includes the background, problem, purpose, research question, conceptual framework, nature of the study, assumptions, scopes and delimitations, limitations, significance, and summary.

Background

Studies on student learning experiences in online writing courses have revealed that applying connectivist strategies contributes to positive student outcomes (Al-Maawali, 2022; Cleary, 2020; Sozudogru et al., 2019). Siemens proposed connectivism as a learning theory in 2004 after examining how individuals learn in a society enriched by technological advances. In his work, he expanded the theory of people learning through connections to include technology, which he referred to as the connectivism learning theory (Siemens, 2004). In 2005, Siemens and Downes theorized that connections are readily found in digital networks, including the digital classroom (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2005).

Literature on connectivism in online classrooms, in general, has addressed collaborating, technology, networks, student success, and online learning. The research on collaborating has discussed applying the connectivist idea of students collaborating with others in online learning at 4-year institutions (Alzain, 2019; Xu & Du, 2021). Studies on the use of technology have involved students utilizing it in courses to help them learn English (Sozudogru et al., 2019) and the use of videoconferencing technology in online courses to develop knowledge (Dai, 2019). Studies about networks have involved students using them as a part of learning from others (Tham et al., 2021; Wang & Zhu, 2019). Recent literature about student participation has addressed factors impacting student success (Pechac & Slantcheva-Durst, 2019) and includes the impact of connectivist principles on student participation and success (Cleary, 2020). The research on online learning has focused on the characteristics of online learners in environments in

which they network with others (Xu & Du, 2021) and the application of connectivist principles to teaching writing (Al-Maawali, 2022). However, none of these studies has addressed if students were from rural or urban areas, and all these studies involved 4-year institutions. Literature on connectivism specific to online writing classrooms has discussed student collaboration with other students in the digital writing classroom of a 4-year institution (Tham et al., 2021). This study was one of a few that examined utilizing connectivist principles in the online writing class. Because students need to be successful in online writing courses where they learn collaboration skills needed in some writing professions (Cummings, 2021), such research was needed.

Studies specific to rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college were not found in the literature reviewed for this study. Therefore, this study explored student experiences with connectivism in online composition classrooms but focused on rural students. I analyzed students' responses to explore how connectivist principles were used in instruction in online composition courses. This study adds to research about the learning experiences rural students have with connectivism in online composition courses at 2-year colleges.

Problem Statement

The problem was the lack of research on rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. Rural students attend 2-year colleges more often than 4-year institutions (Wells et al., 2023). Research has found that rural students have low participation in online college classes and programs (LeBeau et al., 2020; Welser et al., 2019). However, research has revealed the importance of

applying connectivist strategies to instruction in online classes at 4-year institutions because it has a positive impact on students' engagement in the courses (Alzain, 2019; Cleary, 2020; Tham et al., 2021).

While research exists on students' experiences with connectivism in online writing classes at 4-year institutions (Al-Maawali, 2022; Alzain, 2019; Xu & Du, 2021), I did not find studies that were specific to rural students in online composition courses at 2-year colleges. Research on rural students in online writing courses is needed to better understand their experiences (Love & Mock, 2019). Therefore, exploring rural students' learning experiences in an online composition course at a 2-year college is important because it helps to better understand which, if any, elements of connectivism were used in instruction.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. This study utilized a basic qualitative approach, as defined by Patton (2015), to address the gap in the research. Interviews were conducted to generate data regarding rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in online composition courses at 2-year colleges.

Research Question

The research question (RQ) that guided the study was as follows:

RQ: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college?

Conceptual Framework for the Study

This study was based on the theory of connectivism. Downes's (2005) and Siemens's (2004) connectivism theory involves how knowledge is acquired in the digital world through connections. Because of technology, the wealth of information available digitally is constantly shared and changing. Connectivism states that this availability alters how learners acquire knowledge because technology gives them access to large online databases. Having this availability of knowledge encourages them to seek even more knowledge. In addition, learners acquire knowledge from interactions with others who share their experiences and resources in the digital network. Learners then decipher the knowledge they gain from their connections (Siemens, 2005).

The idea of students learning through connections is not new. Vygotsky (1978) set forth a social learning theory that posited that people learn from social experiences with others, materials, and resources. In this theory, in which he described learning as a "social interaction" (p. 34), he stressed the essential role of social environments in developing meaning within a child's mind. This involves students first developing mentally by interacting with their families and learning their cultural values. Through dialogue with their families, children develop beliefs, values, and problem-solving techniques. In addition, Vygotsky believed the community's role is central to the development of meaning in children as they grow because children learn through social interactions with knowledgeable community members. Children also acquire knowledge when they attend school (Vygotsky, 1978).

Downes (2005) and Siemens (2005) furthered Vygotsky's theory by enlarging it to include technology. Their theory of connectivism emphasizes students acquiring knowledge by interacting with other students in addition to knowledgeable scholars, researchers, and practitioners through technological modes. Connectivism includes students making connections and learning new knowledge through technology (Siemens, 2005). Being enrolled in online courses with instructors who incorporate technology in learning will allow students to acquire new knowledge by using those technological resources.

Connectivism was appropriate as the conceptual framework for this qualitative study because I sought to explore connectivist principles being used in instruction in an online composition course at a 2-year college. A qualitative study allows the researcher to generate data gathered from rural students' descriptions of their learning experiences (Patton, 2015). The application of connectivism strategies in the online composition classroom environment was studied. Descriptions of participants' experiences were collected with the principles of connectivism guiding the interview questions and later the analysis of the data collected. Connectivism suggests essential principles that are instrumental in student learning. Some of the principles include

1. The teacher allows different opinions in the classroom, which are drawn from the students sharing their knowledge with others.
2. Teachers create learning opportunities in which students gather and utilize data from various information sources.
3. Technological tools are used to aid student learning.

4. Teachers promote continuous learning by using learning activities that facilitate connections between historical knowledge, new ideas, and current information.
5. Teachers allow students to make decisions about their learning. (Siemens, 2005)

Chapter 2 details these principles.

Nature of the Study

A basic qualitative study was used to collect data regarding rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. Participants were individually interviewed via video format to gather information about their experiences. Final participants included eight rural students, 18 and older, who completed an online composition course at a 2-year college. This sample size was sufficient to identify themes in the data as these participants shared a common experience (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016) of being rural students who took an online composition course at a 2-year college in a Southern state. Southern states are those as defined by the U.S. government, including Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., n.d.). The qualitative approach was appropriate to gather information about their lived experiences (see Patton, 2015) in an online composition class. Prior studies about online writing courses were not specific to the online composition course (Hilliard & Stewart, 2019;

Tham et al., 2021) or used a mixed methodology (Hembrough & Jordan, 2020). Those studies included rural and nonrural students.

The research site was 2-year Southern colleges that require all students to pass an online composition course to complete their program of study. The Downes and Siemens (2005) theory on connectivism was the viewpoint upon which the interview protocol was designed, and the data were collected, coded, and analyzed.

Definitions

Connections: Links between systems, individuals, or groups (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020; Siemens, 2005).

Continuous learning: The knowledge that is constantly being acquired (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020; Siemens, 2005).

Network: A connection that can function to create a whole (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020; Siemens, 2005).

Rural area: An area outside of an urban area (Drescher et al., 2022; Thier et al., 2021; United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Rural student: A student living in an area considered “rural” according to the United States Census Bureau’s definition of “rural area,” outside of an urban area (Byun et al., 2012; United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Southern state: A state in Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Oklahoma, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, or West Virginia (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., n.d.).

Technological tools: Nonhuman instruments used to access the internet or to make connections in the digital world (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020; Siemens, 2005).

Urban area: An area with a population of at least 5000 residents (Drescher et al., 2022; Ratcliffe, 2022; Thier et al., 2021; United States Census Bureau, 2021).

Assumptions

When interviewing students for this study, a few assumptions existed. One assumption was that the students would answer questions honestly regarding their learning experiences in the composition course. Whether those experiences were positive or negative, honest answers were needed for meaningful results that aligned with the RQ and helped fill the gap in the literature. Another assumption was that participants would remember their learning experiences and interactions in the online classroom. This was important because the study was based on exploring their experiences with connectivist strategies in class. Therefore, the assumption that the students would be honest and remember their experiences was necessary.

Scope and Delimitations

To answer the RQ and identify rural students' learning experiences with connectivism, the study focused on eight rural students who completed an online composition course at a 2-year college. Two-year colleges that require their students to complete composition courses were a part of this focus. While this study was based on rural students at any Southern 2-year college, results may be useful to online composition instructors at similar colleges who are challenged with rural student participation or to

other 2-year institutions that have a high failure rate in composition courses. Results may include recommendations for how to improve student success in these courses.

Limitations

The study faced limitations and a potential bias. Participants were geographically homogeneous as they were solicited only from Southern 2-year colleges in the United States. This limited potential participation because the study targeted rural students from one region. A potential researcher bias that could have influenced the study was misinterpreting participants' answers to the interview questions based on my prior knowledge. I studied the principles of connectivism in online writing courses and practiced various instructional strategies as an instructor of online English Composition I and II. To avoid this personal bias as the researcher, I wrote field notes while interviewing and recorded the interviews for accuracy. I also sent interview transcripts to participants to verify their accuracy. Chapter 3 has more details on these measures.

Significance

This study's results help fill the gap in the literature on rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in online composition courses at 2-year colleges. Findings may contribute to the research literature on rural students' learning experiences in online composition. They can help researchers and instructors better understand which instructional practices using connectivist strategies influence students' participation and success in class. The results of the study can lead to positive social change by informing composition instructors of ways to create learning activities that better support rural students' instructional needs. Instructors' enhanced ability to engage students in the

learning process may increase their class participation and, thereby, students' successful completion of the course. Rural students whose instructional needs are met when taking online courses are more likely to complete other online courses in their academic programs. In turn this could, when applied by the study site and similar institutions, augment rural students' enrollment and overall graduation rates. Rural students could also apply their written communication and research skills in careers that may require them to effectively express their ideas and share information about services and policies with others. Further, they could apply the writing, critical thinking, organization, and research skills they gain from the course when communicating with others to solve problems affecting their community.

Summary

Chapter 1 of this study introduced the topic and provided background on research regarding connectivism principles in online classes. I discussed the gap in the literature about rural students' learning experiences in online composition courses. It also included the purpose of facilitating the study, the RQ, the conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. Also included were assumptions, scopes and delimitations, limitations, significance, and a chapter summary. Chapter 2 follows the Chapter 1 summary and provides findings from the literature review about college students' learning experiences in online writing classes.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. The problem was the lack of research on rural students taking composition courses that includes their learning experiences with connectivism at 2-year colleges. Studies have explored both rural and nonrural students in online writing courses at 4-year colleges (Hembrough & Jordan, 2020; Hilliard & Stewart, 2019; Tham et al., 2021). Research has revealed that when instructors utilize certain connectivist strategies, it positively influences student learning in online writing courses, regardless of their background.

Research specific to rural students in the online composition course is needed to help understand students' instructional needs (Love & Mock, 2019). Rural students have low participation in online courses (Welser et al., 2019). However, passing the composition courses is a requirement to attain a degree in most college programs (Learn.org, 2021). Connectivism is suggested as a learning theory that, when implemented in online courses, will increase student participation and completion rates. Therefore, the focus of the study was rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college.

Chapter 2 begins with an introduction that states the problem and purpose of the study and then briefly summarizes recent literature about students in online writing courses. The chapter details the literature search strategy, conceptual framework, and literature review. It ends with the summary and conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

To find scholarly articles about the research topic, I completed a literature search for articles published within the past 5 years. I searched for peer-reviewed articles related to rural student learning experiences in online composition courses as well as connectivism in the classroom. Because of the challenges I encountered in finding peer-reviewed articles on connectivism, I sought help from the Walden librarian for keywords that were relevant to my topic. Keywords I used in the search for studies began in the Walden library with the Thoreau, ERIC, and Academic Search Complete databases. I performed an advanced search of the following keywords: *rural student retention, online composition, online college students and writing instruction, rural students in online writing courses, retention in online higher education, online rural student, student retention, connectivism, collaboration in education, and online learning*. In searching those databases, I used the Boolean phrases “and” and “or” to be specific in finding literature about my topic. I used the phrases *rural online, rural student experience, and online retention* to search the Sage database. I used Google Scholar to search for *connectivism, connectivism in the classroom, connectivism in research, rural students in online writing, and rural education*.

Conceptual Framework

The theory of connectivism, as conceptualized by Siemens and Downes, informed this doctoral study about rural students’ learning experiences in online composition courses. Siemens’s and Downes’s theory of connectivism used Driscoll’s (2000) definition of learning, which states that learning occurs as the result of an individual’s

personal experiences and that learning occurs as the result of him or her interacting with other individuals (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2004). Before Siemens introduced connectivism as a learning theory in 2004 (Siemens, 2004) and Downes in 2005 (Downes, 2005), Siemens noted trends in learning instruction that included the following: learning is a continuous, lifelong process; personal networks contribute to learning; and technology is constantly changing and affecting learning (Siemens, 2004). To Siemens (2004), those trends demonstrated a need for a learning theory that connected prior learning theories, specifically the idea of networking with others to gain knowledge through technology. Therefore, Siemens and Downes further developed connectivism by adding technology as a tenet. Connectivism involves individuals learning through interactions with others and by accessing materials and resources in different networks. However, it posits that the digital world enhances learning including in online classroom environments (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2005).

Connectivism suggests that learning is a cycle. Individuals build upon their knowledge by learning through collaborations with others (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020). Technology widens the field of possible collaborations with a broader selection of networks from which the students can further their knowledge. Because of the vastness of technology, learners are motivated to seek additional knowledge, including in online learning environments (Siemens, 2005). Connectivism as set forth by Siemens (2004) includes the following principles:

1. Teachers allow different opinions in the classroom to facilitate an interchange of ideas among students.

2. Teachers create learning opportunities in which students gather information from various sources.
3. Teachers use technological tools in the classroom to facilitate student learning.
4. Teachers promote continuous learning by using learning activities that encourage and sustain connections between new ideas and accurate, updated information.
5. Teachers allow students to make decisions about their learning. Thus, students interpret the meaning of what they discover.

Siemens and Downes proposed that utilizing elements of connectivism in instruction is essential to enhance student learning (Downes, 2005, 2020; Siemens, 2005). Using the principles in an online learning environment requires students to collaborate with others within the network to broaden their knowledge while developing a sense of community in the classroom. Thus, what was previously the student's knowledge is shared and becomes a collection of knowledge (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020). Researchers have further proposed that connectivism is essential for writing instruction, where students can interact with others connected to global networks and can build upon knowledge gained from their peers' resources (Tham et al., 2021).

Prior learning theories involved students learning through connections. One theory that connected learning to individuals' experiences with people, materials, and instruction was Dewey's (1938) theory on experiential learning. His theory said that students learn through experiences, some of which should be facilitated by teachers. In

addition, Dewey stated that learning occurs in social settings. Further, he stressed that students could take acquired knowledge from experiences and utilize it in relevant life situations. Bruner's (1966) discovery learning theory followed Dewey's and stressed the importance of facilitating instruction in active learning. The theory involved students gaining knowledge through cultural connections in their social world. Bruner stated that being active participants in their culture who are motivated to understand their culture's principles allows students to learn. With that gained knowledge, they become interested in exploring other views and then attain more knowledge that had once before been unattainable (Bruner, 1966). Bruner also stated that within disciplines' learning structures, for example, a course curriculum is important to student learning but not as important as teachers as they must facilitate activities that aid in learning (as cited in Takaya, 2008, p. 7-8).

Vygotsky (1978) also connected students' learning to their experiences. After his death, his ideas on learning were discovered in notebooks he had written that were later published (Zavershneva, 2010). According to Vygotsky's social constructivism theory, a child's social environment is important to cognitive development. Children's cognitive development is first influenced by their family's cultural environment. In the family environment, children develop values and beliefs. Children's learning is further developed in their school and community environments. Vygotsky also stressed how essential the community is to student learning as children gain knowledge through those social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Siemens (2005) and Downes (2005) furthered Dewey, Bruner, and Vygotsky's ideas with the theory of connectivism and added technology.

Connectivism related to online courses has been the focus of a limited number of research studies. However, recent studies on connectivism revealed that applying its principles in online courses influenced learner success. For example, Cleary (2020) analyzed the feedback of 30 student participants in online technical communication courses to investigate the connectivist idea of connections. In his findings, Cleary concluded that interactions encourage peer engagement in courses and programs and contribute to student success. Tham et al. (2021) investigated the use of the connectivist idea of collaboration in writing instruction. The researchers facilitated a qualitative study of both instructors and students in an online writing course at a midwestern university. It did not specify the number of participants in the study which investigated student collaboration on projects with students in another country. Based on their findings, researchers concluded that utilizing connectivist principles in writing instruction positively impacts learning. Overall, these studies show that connectivism can be useful for analyzing students' experiences in online courses.

The benefit of using this conceptual framework in my study was to help understand rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition classroom. Conducting a qualitative study allows a researcher to explore participants' experiences (Patton, 2015). Therefore, I sought to learn about rural students' experiences with connectivism in an online composition course. I analyzed the data gathered to determine if students were allowed to give their opinion on class topics, if they had learning opportunities and were allowed to use various sources to gather information, if they used technology in the classroom for learning (nonhuman

appliances), if their teacher promoted continuous learning, and if students were able to make decisions about their learning. Using these principles to explore rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in online composition classes helps to better understand their instructional needs in the online classroom.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

As I researched literature from the past 5 years regarding the tenets of connectivism, I found that most of the previous studies on connectivism were conducted in countries outside of the United States. While no studies were found that utilized connectivist principles to understand rural students' learning experiences in an online composition course at a 2-year college, certain themes recurred in this literature. They included collaboration, which is divided into a collaboration between learners and collaboration between learners and others, technology, networks, student success, and online learning.

Collaboration

Collaboration was a recurring theme found in the literature on connectivism. Collaborating in learning today extends beyond face-to-face interactions and into digital spaces at different times (Utecht & Keller, 2019). Research on the application of connectivist principles to learning in other countries, such as China (Xu & Du, 2021) and Saudi Arabia (Alzain, 2019), revealed the positive effects connectivist strategies had on learning. In recent research on collaboration in Indonesian education programs, researchers found that when instructors facilitate strategic collaboration in learning, the quality of education improves. This mixed-method study employed interviews and

surveys on 521 school personnel, including instructors, members of an Indonesian education organization, school supervisors, and school leaders (Tahili et al., 2022). Similar earlier research in the United States showed that by collaborating in writing, students can improve their ability to communicate with other students, even on a worldwide level. A U.S.-based study found that collaborating helps students' digital literacy increase (Tham et al., 2021). In the next section, collaboration in learning is divided into the following headings: collaboration between learners and others and collaboration between learners.

Collaboration Between Learners and Others

When students collaborate with others, learning can be effective. For instance, in Indonesia, when education involved collaboration between students, parents, school committees, and the community, learning was found to be effective (Tahili et al., 2022). When students collaborate with teachers during class as well as outside of normal class sessions, teachers can offer feedback on assignments and conduct follow-up checks and evaluations at any time and in any location with internet access. This allows students to respond at any time they, too, are available regardless of the location. This gives students the ability to ask teachers questions and thus improves learning. Students' motivation and learning abilities also improve because of collaborating with others in the online environment (Alzain, 2019).

Learning can also occur between students and other individuals on online platforms. First, according to connectivist theory, students need to have opportunities to use various sources to gather information. This allows them to gain knowledge from a

wider variety of areas (Siemens, 2005). Second, learners deciding on where to look for information for themselves is a part of connectivism (Utecht & Keller, 2019). Learners choosing what they want to learn and how to proceed in learning about that topic is another concept related to connectivism. This is referred to as students having autonomy, or freedom in making determinations about their own learning decisions. An example of one of these connectivist principles being utilized in the classroom environment is instructors allowing learners to decide on what to search for after instructing them to choose between a platform such as Google or YouTube. On Google, learners can search for topics and then decide which ones to view based on the results of the search. Similarly, on YouTube, learners can search for topics or people whose channels or videos they might be interested in viewing.

An example of instructors allowing students to determine where to seek research for class activities is students choosing to use Wikipedia. Wikipedia is an online encyclopedia that makes information accessible to students and other individuals globally. Users can use the platform to contribute their opinions to topics, but the information learners can find on Wikipedia is not peer-reviewed (Utecht & Keller, 2019), which is a reason why students must be mindful of which platforms to use to seek credible information. Even so, according to connectivism, knowledge is within the "diversity of opinions" (Siemens, 2005). Therefore, knowledge is still created when students are allowed to share their opinions on topics on platforms such as Wikipedia because new knowledge can be found during the exchanges with others.

Collaboration Between Learners

There are positive effects when learners collaborate with other learners. Online learners increase their knowledge by collaborating with other learners. Their knowledge of other cultures increases. Online learners also build relationships through collaborating (House et al., 2022). Platforms such as Microsoft Office and Google allow online learners to collaborate in spaces, including Google Docs and Shared Office 365's Word documents. In these spaces, students can collaborate while taking notes or working on writing projects (Utecht & Keller, 2019). Collaborating while using these tools is important because research has found that when university students use Google to collaborate with other students in an online educational technology course, students' self-confidence and communication skills improve (Alzain, 2019).

When instructors create learning opportunities in which students collaborate specifically in writing courses, it deepens students' understanding of writing and helps them to expand their texts more than their normal writing lengths (Al-Maawali, 2022). This is important for students who graduate and enter professional writing jobs because some writing jobs require employees to collaborate with other cultures, often in online environments. Therefore, students not only need strong collaborating skills but also strong cultural competence. An example of this was the University of North Carolina internationalizing its professional writing courses to collaborate with Polish professionals. The endeavor for learners to study abroad in Poland was not originally intended to be an online collaboration, but because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the university enforced the change to the online environment. The data from this study were

collected from instructors' perspectives, student work, and online observations (Cummings, 2021).

On the other hand, research has revealed challenges students face in collaborating with peers. For instance, researchers found that while collaborating globally with other students increases students' intercultural sensitivity, their attentiveness within interactions (Swartz et al., 2020), and their cultural competence (House et al., 2022), global collaboration can be challenging (Swartz et al., 2020). According to Swartz et al. (2020), some students' respect for other cultures slightly decreased, and they did not find the interactions with students of other cultures to be enjoyable. The qualitative part of the study revealed the students' reasons, including the language barriers, differences in time zones in which students lived, different engagement levels amongst students, and issues with technology. This idea leads to another theme connected to the research on connectivism, which is technology being used in learning.

Technology

Students in online or digital environments where they use technology was another theme found in the search for literature about connectivism. In connectivist theory, when students utilize technology, or “nonhuman appliances” (Siemens, 2005), to seek and share knowledge, it creates learning (Siemens, 2005). As decision-makers, students choose the type of technology to use to learn (Tham et al., 2021). Corbett and Spinello (2020) also noted that technology was the basis of the studies found on connectivism, including the 2018 study by Corbett and other researchers (Corbett et al., 2018). Specifically, technology connected leaders to learning, just as technology connects

students to learning in the classroom in connectivist theory. Online learners use technology in the form of desktop computers, mobile devices, notebooks, laptops, and tablets to navigate online courses. Research has shown that online writing students in particular use laptops for their writing tasks more than other forms of technology (Martinez et al., 2019).

Researchers Wolf and Wolf (2023) studied the use of artificial intelligence, or AI, to assess students' work in an online writing course. In the 14-week study about nursing students in a master's degree program at a U.S. university, the researchers sought to determine how having the online writing class affected 64 students' scholarly writing. In the study, findings from a survey and an AI assessment tool showed that students' performance improved while in the online course.

Research conducted outside of the United States has found that technology supports connectivist theory, offering learners the means of completing learning activities and collaborating on the Internet. In a 7-week quantitative study with 27 participants who were from different countries but were enrolled in an English course at a university, Sozudogru et al. (2019) examined the use of technology along with supplemental learning materials in English language learning where connectivism is the basis. Students used computers or mobile phones to access the internet. Results showed that technology students used for social networking on online platforms such as Facebook and blogs increased student motivation and helped students learn the English language.

Networks

Networks appeared in the literature several times during the search for connectivist studies. A network in learning is a connection that can function to create a whole (Brandao & Algarvio, 2020). In 2008 Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) began with connectivism as the instructional model to connect students into large, open learning networks (Corbett & Spinello, 2020; Wang & Zhu, 2019). The MOOCs that are based on connectivist principles are called Connectivist MOOCs (cMOOCs), and others that are based on learning as individuals are called extended MOOCs or eMOOCs (Conole, 2014). Having open access to educational materials in networks through MOOCs gives students the ability to be flexible in learning environments as they can choose when and where to seek information but without limitations, which is also the connectivist idea of autonomy in action in student learning (Lan & Hew, 2020).

According to other connectivism-related research by Tham et al. (2021), one effective connectivist strategy in the writing classroom involves students actively participating in their learning and building what are called personal learning networks (PLNs). PLNs are networked connections of organizations, resources, and people that support and improve learning. While learning begins within the student, it also takes place outside of him or her through these connections. For instance, Tham et al. (2021) found that by using mobile phones or computers, students can learn from others through social networks and the Internet and can enhance their connections. Students are encouraged to not only share information with their networks but also actively gather

new, current information. Engaging with other students through the appropriate networks can help students become more productive in learning environments (Cummings, 2021).

Another example of literature that reflects the connectivist idea of networks in learning is a study by Alzain (2019). In the study, the social networks in which students collaborated were Edmodo and Google. Researchers determined that students utilizing social networks in online courses positively affected collaborative learning.

Student Success

Student success in online classroom environments was another theme in the literature on connectivism. Recent research on MOOCs has revealed that peer interactions contribute to student success. For instance, Cleary (2020) studied the use of connectivism in online technical communication courses. The researcher determined that in the online class, peer interactions encourage student engagement and contribute to student learning success. Cleary designed a program in which students first participated in an in-person, two-day workshop before participating in online coursework in which they would use principles of connectivism to collaborate on class activities. The researcher gathered feedback from the 2018-2019 cohort of students and found that students having online discussions in which they interacted with each other helped them to better understand others' perspectives and improve their networks. Another study on utilizing connectivist strategies in the classroom where student success was a theme was conducted by Nazari et al. (2021). In applying connectivist principles in electronic learning (e-learning) systems, results showed that connectivism increased student success.

The quality of learner motivation in online courses also affects student success in MOOCs. A study by Bai et al. (2022) focused on online learner satisfaction with a course in China during the COVID-19 pandemic and how fearing the pandemic, student self-determination, and the quality of the course affected their retention in the MOOC. Findings showed that those factors impacted learner retention. Therefore, course developers must improve MOOC performance to improve learner dropout rates.

Because of differences in rural and nonrural student degree attainment in the United States (Russell et al., 2022), course design in MOOCs is of even greater significance when considering rural students in higher education. This is because research has found that when students have access to online courses, barriers they originally faced based on where they live are eliminated (LeBeau et al., 2020). For instance, LeBeau et al.'s (2020) U.S. study that examined the Advanced Placement exam pass rates at rural Midwestern schools found that pass rates were higher in the online courses that had students participating in the program.

Regarding additional research specific to rural students, research on other factors that positively impact learner success has been conducted. For example, Pechac and Slantcheva-Durst (2019) conducted a nonexperimental quantitative study in which they examined 5,808 records of mostly rural students in a coaching program at 15 Midwestern community colleges to determine the impact certain teaching strategies have on students. For instance, they sought to determine how academic coaching impacts student retention. The study revealed 17 elements that contributed to student success. Some of those

elements were as follows: rural or suburban background, the frequency and types of contacts academic coaches made with the student, and enrollment status.

Online Learning

The theme online learning was recurring in the literature on connectivism strategies in online courses. Prior studies focused on categorized learners based on demographic characteristics, such as age; online patterns, such as logging into class, posting online, and actively participating in class; and psychological factors, including satisfaction with courses and motivation to learn (Milligan et al., 2013; Xiao et al., 2019). One study found that when seeking categories of learners in cMOOCs, one type was the connectivist learner (Bai, 2020).

In a more recent study about connectivism in online learning in China, researchers Xu and Du (2021) found that there are five types of learners in online learning environments. In Xu and Du's 12-week study on learners in a cMOOC, the researchers analyzed participants' characteristics to determine what types of learners exist in online environments from concept networks and social networks. They did so by categorizing learners' cognitive engagement levels in an online course that utilized connectivist principles. Learners in the study, including students, administrators, teachers, and industry practitioners, decided on the platform on which they interacted with other learners. Their options were a Chinese blogging platform called Sina Blog, an instant messenger known as WeChat, and a Chinese cMOOC platform. Using this method to connect learners to knowledge via different platforms created a social network for participants. The study's findings revealed that the following types of learners exist in

cMOOCs: connected creative, reflective, social, wandering, and marginal learners, with connected creative learners ranking highest in terms of their social network prominence and the others following in order from highest to lowest rank. Results showed that the highest-ranked learners (the connected creative learners) exhibited stronger control in social networks and had a better reputation and greater influence in the networks.

On the other hand, results also revealed that the study only had a few successful connectivist learners. This was based on their limited interactions as independent learners with the choice of which platform to interact. Out of 425 participants, only 25 from each type actively participated and were thus considered to be successful connectivist learners. However, Xu and Du's (2021) study still revealed that utilizing connectivist strategies in online learning environments is beneficial for learners. The researchers determined that a larger group of participants was needed for future similar research on cMOOCs as the number of participants affects the effectiveness of continuing an active learning community in an online environment.

Stressing the importance of being an effective writer in the digital world, especially after the changes in higher education because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Al-Maawali (2022) conducted a case study on the application of connectivist principles to teaching writing to first-year English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The researcher collected data from 43 students to determine their perspectives on using connectivist strategies in their writing as a collective in the class and personally. Specifically, the researcher sought students' perspectives on how they made sense of their writing processes. Findings revealed that using both connectivism and cognitive, or

mental, process theories helped reduce writer's block the new writing students often experienced. Combining the two theories by having students reflect upon their mental process in creating written communications increased their written content. Thus, for writing instruction to be effective in today's digital world, students must be aware of their connection-making processes of acquiring knowledge. As a result of the study's findings, the researcher recommended writing instructors use this reflective approach to help learners acquire knowledge in conjunction with utilizing connectivist strategies in writing. Exploring rural students' experiences in online writing courses according to connectivist principles can help to understand how they acquire knowledge. This study is meaningful because it reveals strategies to help students with writing in the digital world inside and outside of higher education classrooms.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 of this study reintroduced the problem and purpose of facilitating a study about what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. I described the literature search strategy and databases searched and included the conceptual framework and literature review of the topic. The literature revealed that rural students face barriers to their success in the online classroom. The literature also revealed themes associated with connectivism, including collaboration between learners and collaboration between learners and others, technology, networks, student success, and online learning. As the studies have shown, applying connectivist principles in online classrooms, including writing courses, can increase student success. However, most U.S. studies on rural students' learning

experiences with online classes have been based on 4-year institutions, not 2-year colleges. In addition, few U.S. studies have been conducted that have focused only on rural students in online writing courses at 2-year colleges. This should be known to increase knowledge about rural students in U.S. higher education who use written communication skills in college and in the workplace, where strong communication skills are important. Instructors need information on how applying certain connectivist principles in online writing courses that rural students are enrolled in can help increase their success in learning. Therefore, this study helps fill the gap in the literature on rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in online composition courses at 2-year colleges.

Chapter 3 addresses the role of the researcher, the rationale behind the study's qualitative design, and the methodology I used to gather data about rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. Chapters 1 and 2 introduced the study's background and reviewed the literature on the topic. Chapter 3 includes the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, the methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and a chapter summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The RQ that guided the study was as follows: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college? The focus of the study was on rural students who completed an online composition course at a 2-year college in the Southern United States. To fulfill the study's purpose, I conducted a basic qualitative study.

In this qualitative study, I conducted semistructured interviews with rural students to explore their experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. A basic qualitative study is used when researchers seek to generate data on participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2015). Phenomenological qualitative studies are conducted when researchers seek to understand experiences about a phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewing participants is most common in qualitative studies on education-related topics. Interviews involve researchers and participants conversing about a study. In a semistructured interview, the researcher gathers data from participant responses to predetermined questions. The organization of questions can be

flexible and do not have to be asked in a specific order, providing the researcher with the ability to adjust questions according to the information gathered from participant responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In my study, I explored rural students' lived experiences with connectivism in an online composition course. As the researcher, I conversed with rural student participants during the interview about the study, which was a basic qualitative research design.

Justification for Using Basic Qualitative Design

The experiences of students in the online composition course could be studied from a variety of qualitative methodologies, from a quantitative perspective as well as from a mixed methods perspective. In this study, I used a basic qualitative design and focused on interviewing participants to understand the phenomenon of utilizing connectivist principles in online writing classes. The basic qualitative study was preferred to investigate the experiences of rural students in an online composition course.

I chose a qualitative research design for this study because it best supported the purpose of the study and the collection of data that was used to answer the study's RQ. Qualitative research methods are valuable in providing rich descriptions of complex phenomena (Creswell, 2014). After all, insight of this nature could be used to address the problem identified in this study about rural students' experiences with connectivism in online composition courses. The RQ that helped guide the study was as follows: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college? Based on the RQ, this study required a qualitative methods approach

using interviews for the data collection process. In the study, I interviewed rural students who completed an online composition course at a 2-year college.

Because I was interested in exploring rural students' experiences, a quantitative approach grounded in a measurement relationship would not have been appropriate for this study. In my study, I neither collected quantitative data regarding the phenomenon studied nor was I examining the relationships between variables.

Several qualitative approaches may be used to address certain research needs (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A narrative research design is used to describe individuals' detailed life stories (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, I did not use this approach for my study because the focal point was not on detailed life experiences for individuals (see Papakitsou, 2020). The grounded theory approach is used to build theories and interpret information and experiences within a social context (Morgan-Trimmer & Wood, 2016). In my study, I did not seek to build a theory based on data collected during interviews. Ethnographic research is different from other qualitative methods as data collection in "its commitment to direct experience with a population or community of concern" (Schensul et al., 2012, p. 2). In my study, I did not use this approach as the data were primarily collected through interviews to gather rural students' perspectives instead of defining a phenomenon. A case study is used to investigate a bounded system using multiple sources of data or evidence, including interviews, observations, document analysis, or the participants in the research site or their communities with members of their community, or events and activities that the participants are engaged in (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I used one source of data collection

to gain a better understanding of rural students' learning experiences in an online composition course at a 2-year college.

Role of the Researcher

In my study as the researcher, I was the participants' observer. While I worked in a professional role as an online English Composition I and II instructor, I had no personal or professional relationship with the study's participants, who were students from unspecified, 2-year Southern colleges. In my typical classroom environment as a teacher, the relationship of power involves me presiding over the classroom to manage students when facilitating learning activities.

In my study, the student-teacher power relationship did not exist. The only relationship involved was observer-participant as I conducted interviews to gather data about their student experiences in an online composition course at a 2-year Southern college. Because I was not knowledgeable of the students, I avoided ethical issues that could have arisen based on a student-teacher power relationship by sending participants a confidentiality agreement.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

Participants met certain criteria for the study. They had to be rural students, ages 18 and older, who completed an online composition course at any Southern 2-year college. The sample size was eight rural students. This size was sufficient to reach saturation and identify themes in the data as the participants shared the common

experience (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016) of being rural students who completed an online composition course at a 2-year college.

After I obtained permission from Walden University to facilitate the study, I began recruiting participants. I shared my study invitation flyer that listed the study criteria across social media platforms. After potential participants emailed me to express their interest in participating in my study, I emailed them the consent form. With their consent, I scheduled a Zoom interview and proceeded to collect interview data on the agreed-upon date and time.

Instrumentation

In qualitative research, the researcher's role is to be an instrument utilized to collect data to help understand an individual's experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As the researcher, to collect data about rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in the online composition course, I individually interviewed participants by Zoom. In addition, I recorded each interview. Interviewing participants was sufficient to collect data about their learning experiences. Because interviews were recorded, and I wrote notes during them, I was able to ensure I did not miss any parts of participants' responses to questions. The interview questions are in Appendix A.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

After I obtained approval from Walden's IRB to conduct my study, I began data collection. I shared the approved flyer on social media to request voluntary participation in the study. The flyer included contact information for reaching me by phone or via email. Interested individuals reached me via text message and email. I responded with a

request for their email address and then emailed them the consent form. Once I received consent, I scheduled the interviews based on participants' convenience and set up the meeting via Zoom video conferencing. I emailed participants the Zoom meeting link within 30 minutes of each interview.

Before each Zoom interview, I asked the participant for permission to record. Then, I set the video to record on the platform. I described the voluntary and confidential nature of the interview as well as the interview procedures (see Appendix B). During the interviews, I followed my script for consistency and wrote field notes for accuracy. After each interview, I thanked the participant for participating and advised them that I would send the transcript via email within 1 week. I also reminded each participant of my contact information for additional questions or comments (see Appendix B) and stopped recording. I saved each interview to my personal, locked computer and will delete and trash the recording data after the required 5 years. As planned, I emailed interview transcripts to participants within a week to verify accuracy. I also emailed each participant details about the \$20 e-card after purchase. The duration of data collection was 5 months. Individual interviews lasted no longer than 45 minutes. After completing nine interviews and excluding one that did not meet criteria from data analysis, I no longer sought additional participants. I met my minimum of eight participants. It was the end of the semester, and I had no other requests to participate in the study.

Data Analysis Plan

After I transcribed each interview, I used Microsoft Word to analyze it and the field notes to find codes regarding the RQ. I examined the data to identify themes in the

responses by first hand coding the data that related to the RQ and then categorized the data based on the conceptual framework and writing themes that emerged while doing so. When coding, no discrepant data were found. This would have been data not belonging in any of the categories, including from welcoming the participant, describing the interview protocol, and thanking them at the end of the interview. Further data analysis details are included in the next chapter.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To ensure that my study's results were credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable, I used certain strategies according to Merriam and Tisdell (2016). To establish credibility, I first verified that my transcripts were accurate and then sent participants the interview transcripts to ensure they were correct and to ensure they answered questions honestly. To establish the transferability of the study, I documented my research procedure and all steps involved in facilitating the study as well as my reasons for using certain procedures. To establish dependable results, I maintained an audit trail (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that consisted of documentation of all data I collected and analyzed. In addition, to establish confirmability, I referred to the field notes I wrote for each interview, and I also documented my thoughts during the interview and research processes. Those thoughts remained separate from participant data collected during the interviews.

Ethical Procedures

Before conducting my study, I obtained approval from Walden's IRB. My approval number was 06-06-23-0971370. The participants recruited consisted of

individuals who reached out to me after seeing my interview invitation flyer. They each emailed me the words “I consent” to agree to participate in the study and acknowledge its voluntary, confidential nature. To remain ethical, I did not offer incentives for participating in this study. Participants received a Visa e-card solely as a “thank you” for participating. No participants decided to withdraw from the study, so I did not have to recruit replacement participants for that reason. All interview data and participant contact information remain confidential, and after sending each participant the interview transcript, I did not use their real names on the data collected. Instead, I named the saved transcripts according to their interview number to maintain anonymity. I keep my field notes locked in my computer desk at home. I will continue to protect interview data by keeping my computer that holds interview recordings locked and by remaining logged out of the Zoom video platform when I am not using it. Data collected will be stored for 5 years, per Walden’s policy.

Summary

Chapter 3 of this study began with the chapter introduction. I discussed research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, and methodology, which was broken down into participant selection logic and instrumentation. I then described procedures for recruitment, participation, the data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and the chapter summary. Chapter 4 follows the Chapter 3 summary and provides the study’s results.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate rural students' experiences with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college. The RQ was as follows: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college? Chapter 4 includes the study's setting, participants' demographics, my data collection and analysis process, evidence of trustworthiness, the study results, and a chapter summary.

Setting

This study was open to participants from any Southern state, and interviews were conducted via Zoom from my home office. My office is located on the second floor of my home. To ensure privacy during data collection, no one was allowed upstairs. Also, my office door was closed and locked during each interview. I used my personal laptop to interview participants, all of whom were at home during the interviews.

Demographics

Participants included eight adults, ages 18 and older, who completed a composition course at a Southern 2-year college. This study was open to individuals from any Southern U.S. state. The final participants were from the states of South Carolina, Florida, and Georgia. To keep data collection and the volunteer nature of the study discreet, I did not ask participants to disclose the name of the 2-year college in which they completed the online composition class. Although the study was open to all genders, all participants were females. All final eight participants had taken either English

Composition 101 or 102. Seven participants discussed their learning experiences in English Composition 101, while one participant discussed English Composition 102. Further, the participant stated she was dually enrolled in high school while taking the English Composition 102 course.

Data Collection

My data collection process did not differ from my original plans. After receiving Walden IRB's approval to conduct my study, I began sharing my study invitation flyer across social media platforms. The platforms included Instagram, professional Facebook groups, including those of 2-year colleges in South Carolina and Georgia, and LinkedIn. Individuals immediately began sending me private messages to express interest in participating. After each person expressed interest in the study, I emailed them the consent form. With confirmation of consent from participants, I followed up with an email asking for their availability to interview and set interviews based on their schedules. Interviews were conducted between June 30, 2023, and November 10, 2023, via Zoom meetings.

Two circumstances arose during data collection. One was that the internet disconnected for two participants during their interviews. However, when the internet reconnected, the interviews continued. The other circumstance related to the offer of a \$20 gift card to participants. An individual entered the participant group two times and thus had to be eliminated from data collection. It was believed that the individual entered twice to take advantage of the \$20 gift card. As a result, I needed more participants to

have enough participants to reach saturation (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Consequently, I added other avenues for recruiting on social media.

I researched the LinkedIn profiles of 2-year college administrators in Southern states. After identifying seven potential participants, I sent them requests to become LinkedIn connections. Once six administrators accepted the requests, I began resharing my study's invitation flyer on LinkedIn and Facebook each week. Four Southern 2-year college administrators shared the invitation with their student bodies.

If, after a week of receiving a participant's consent and not receiving an email with their interview availability, a follow-up email was sent. One participant responded that she did not meet the study criteria because she had taken the online composition class before 2021. Interviews were scheduled for consenting respondents based on their availability. On the interview day, meeting links were sent 30 minutes before the time scheduled. Of the 18 consent emails received, 13 individuals scheduled interviews. One participant canceled the interview on the scheduled date because of family issues. Out of the remaining 12, 10 individuals were interviewed. Two potential participants did not keep the interview appointment or respond to a follow-up email to reschedule if needed. This resulted in 10 individuals being interviewed.

The interview protocol was followed for all interviews. None exceeded the 60 minutes allotted for the meetings. One interview meeting was ended once the participant disclosed that the online composition class had been completed in 2019, which did not meet the 2021 criteria. That audio recording was deleted and was not included as a part of the data collected.

The same procedures were followed to save and protect all interview data. Each interview was recorded on Zoom and saved under the names Interviews 1 to 9 on my personal computer. Interview transcripts were named according to the order in which interviews were conducted: Interview 1 Transcript, for example. Field notes were also stored on my personal computer. After checking to ensure the individual interview recordings were clear and saved, I purchased the \$20 Vanilla Visa e-card and sent the confirmation to the participant's email address. After data analysis, only eight of the nine interviews were included. Interview 4 was excluded after I reviewed the transcript, listened to the recording, and determined the participant did not meet the study's criteria. Although the participant had expressed consent, during the interview she mentioned being an undergraduate at a 4-year college while taking the composition class.

Data Analysis

To start data analysis, I identified themes by finding repeated words and phrases in the data (see Lofgren, 2013; Patton, 2015). Microsoft Word Dictation was used to transcribe all interviews within 2 days of completion. Each interview transcript was reviewed and edited for accuracy before being sent to participants to review for correctness. No participants requested changes to the transcripts.

The transcripts and field notes were analyzed to identify codes aligning with the RQ. Annotations were added to transcripts to note synonymous meanings of words participants repeated related to experiences with connectivism, and excerpts related to connectivism were highlighted. Phrases and words that participants repeated most about their learning experiences with connectivism were highlighted and added to a Microsoft

Excel document as codes connecting the data to the RQ. On the document, participants who repeated each code and the number of times it was discussed were noted.

The codes found were collaborating, watching and recording videos, discussions, using a laptop/computer (used interchangeably), and responding. The following codes related to participants' experiences as online composition students gaining knowledge when the instructor allowed them to share diverse opinions within required class activities: collaborating, discussions, and responding. The other codes were applied when participants described how the instructor facilitated the use of technological tools in learning: watching and recording videos and using a computer/laptop. Participants described being required to upload videos of themselves reading essays on topics and then having to respond to peers' videos, which led to them learning more about the topic and gaining new perspectives. Both experiences represent two principles of connectivism from the conceptual framework: teachers use technological tools in the classroom to facilitate learning and teachers allow different opinions in the classroom to facilitate an interchange of ideas among students (Siemens, 2004). Next, I totaled the number of times the codes were repeated across all participants and ordered them from most to least repeated in Excel. Table 1 displays the codes, the number of times discussed across interviews, which participants described them, and an interview excerpt pertaining to each code.

Table 1*Codes Across Interviews*

| Codes | Times repeated | Participants | Excerpt |
|-------------------------------|----------------|-------------------------|---|
| Collaborating | 38 | 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 | Participant 5: "He required us to interact with at least three students every week on our discussions, and we would have to respond to their prompt, and they must respond to ours and then, you know, we would just keep going back and forth and going back and forth, so we will be in communication a lot, and he would also say you know email a friend if you don't understand or if you need a little extra help. If it's something that I can't do maybe somebody else can help you and help give you a better understanding." |
| Watching and recording videos | 30 | 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, and 9 | Participant 2: "At the beginning I know we had to watch a video like a YouTube video to show us like how to submit the work, and it was very simple. Well, the professor made the video. It was just talking and showing us like where to go, what to click on, and how to do it." |
| Discussions | 19 | 3, 5, and 8 | Participant 3: "Collaborating kind of means working together which in an online course is a little bit difficult there's not a lot of options to collaborate when you're online, whereas if you were say in a library working on the research paper for this class, you could discuss it with your peers and have different books and different discussions and get different ideas. The only collaboration we really had was the weekly discussions and responding to our peers about their ideas and them responding to us about ours." |
| Using a computer/laptop | 17 | 3, 5, and 6 | Participant 5: "I used my computer, and I also used my phone." |
| responding | 16 | 3, 6, and 8 | Participant 3: "There was weekly prompts, and then we made an initial post where we responded to the prompts, and then we also responded to one or more of our peers from what we learned from their response to that prompt. There were times that the instructor also responded in the daily or the weekly discussions." |

Note. Research question: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college?

Similar codes were grouped into the categories interacting with others and course requirements. The category interacting with others was appropriate for the codes about teachers allowing participants to share their opinions, which led to new knowledge: collaborating, discussions, and responding. Course requirements was the appropriate category for the codes related to participants describing how the instructor required students to use technological devices to work with others to learn about topics: watching and recording videos and using a computer/laptop.

From patterns in the categories, two themes emerged that connected the categories to the conceptual framework and helped analyze participant responses that address the RQ: utilizing technology and collaborating with students or with the instructor. From the category course requirements, the theme utilizing technology emerged from participants' learning experiences related to using of technology in required learning activities. From the category interacting with others, the theme collaborating with students or the instructor emerged based on with whom participants interacted to learn new knowledge. Table 2 displays the codes related to the themes and interview excerpts.

Table 2*Emergent Themes*

| Codes | Themes | Excerpts |
|--|--|--|
| Collaborating, discussions, and responding | Collaborating with the instructor or with students | Participant 5: "I collaborated with my teacher a lot. I would send him my papers before they were due, and he would edit them for me, so he was in communication a whole lot. We would collaborate a whole lot." |
| Watching and recording videos, and using a computer/laptop | Utilizing technology | Participant 1: "Sometimes we'd have the open windows, extra windows, to watch stuff on how to open a Word document. And that was difficult, and sometimes we had to open up stuff to do a presentation, and we had to record...a YouTube video." |

Note. Research question: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college?

Discrepant data were any data that did not align with the themes. If collected data does not fit into any of the categories, or contrasts other findings, it is discrepant (Creswell & Poth, 2016). During data analysis, no discrepant data were found that did not address my RQ about rural students' experiences with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college or data that did not relate to the conceptual framework. When I compared interview data to the conceptual framework and to the literature review's findings, there were no contradictory data. The data collected in my study related to connectivism.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is important in qualitative research for ethical results. To increase trustworthiness, I followed Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) strategies for credible,

transferable, dependable, and confirmable study results. Next is the explanation of how I established each in my study.

Credibility

Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) measures were followed to establish credibility. Credibility refers to a study's findings being consistent with reality (Shenton, 2004). Credibility is needed for believable results. Therefore, during each interview, participants were asked the same predetermined questions. Merriam and Tisdell's data analysis process was followed after each interview to increase credibility of findings. I listened to the recordings three times and transcribed them verbatim to ensure accuracy. During the first level of analysis, I turned on Word's dictation feature to transcribe the interviews. For the second level, I listened to the recordings and checked the transcripts for accuracy, comparing the transcripts to what the participants said, making corrections as needed. Because Word's dictation tool did not add punctuation, I listened to the recordings a third time to add appropriate punctuation. Further, I emailed the transcripts to participants within a week of interviewing for their review for accuracy. They were asked to email changes to their responses to ensure they expressed their thoughts about their experiences in the online composition class. No participants requested changes or expressed that transcripts were inaccurate. This was important in verifying participants expressed their true experiences in the interviews.

Transferability

Transferability in a study refers to having sufficient information to apply it to other settings (Shenton, 2004). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) recommended keeping an

audit trail to help the study be replicated for future research in other settings. To ensure the transferability of the study, I journaled field notes about the research procedure and reasons for it. Thorough descriptions of the participant selection process, inclusion criteria, and interview protocol were included, as well as the pre-and post-interview script, the main interview questions, and probing questions.

Dependability

Dependability in a study refers to its researchers being able to replicate it and arrive at the same conclusions (Shenton, 2004). To maintain dependable or reliable results, according to Merriam and Tisdell's ideas (2016), I documented each part of the data collection and analysis processes and maintained an audit trail. Journaling how I completed each step and the reasons for doing so helped to ensure the processes were reliable. Future researchers could achieve dependable results by following my processes.

Confirmability

Confirmability in research refers to a study's results being the participants' experiences and not being influenced by researcher bias (Shenton, 2004). Like Merriam and Tisdell's strategies (2016), to establish confirmability, I journaled field notes for each interview and used rich descriptions when documenting my thoughts during the interviews and data analysis processes. Those thoughts remained in a separate document from data collected that was also verified for accuracy. This helped reduce bias and helped me avoid misinterpreting participants' experiences with connectivism in the online composition class because of my prior knowledge as an instructor of the class.

Results

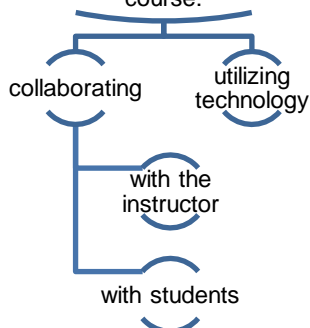
From the analysis, two themes emerged that inform the RQ. To an extent, the eight participants described their learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a Southern 2-year college. Figure 1 displays how the themes align with the RQ and reveals participants' experiences with connectivism as rural students in the online composition course they completed. Next is the explanation of the themes in the order of those participants discussed the most. This is important to understand how the results inform the RQ. Each section includes quotes from participants describing their experiences.

Figure 1

Research Question Informed by Themes

Research Question: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college?

Themes related to rural students' experiences in an online composition course:



RQ

The RQ was as follows: What are rural students' learning experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college? Participants expressed having some experiences with connectivism while in the online class. The themes that

emerged and addressed the RQ were utilizing technology and collaborating—with students or with the online composition instructor.

Theme 1: Collaborating

Like one of the recurring themes from the literature review, a theme that emerged in this study and addressed the RQ about students' experiences with connectivism was collaborating, with students or with the online composition instructor. According to connectivism, instructors can facilitate an exchange of ideas in the digital classroom to create new knowledge. One of its principles refers to the instructor allowing students to share diverse opinions, which leads to learning (Siemens, 2004). In the study, participants described having this experience by collaborating.

Collaborating With Students

In this study, six participants experienced collaborating with other students to share and gain new knowledge of class topics, including Participants 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9. Most participants defined collaborating as working together in the online classroom, although it was limited. They described collaborating as being helpful because they expressed different views on the same topic and learned from each other by sharing their perspectives. Participant 8 said collaborating in learning was “a collective effort to just teach each other materials that each of us may be like fluent in an area of study that others aren't, and we try to take them in so we all can learn.” She mentioned that reading her peers' replies gave her a new perspective and helped her improve in learning the writing materials. Other participants, including Participants 3 and 7, described

experiencing collaborating in the online composition class as well, but it was limited to the weekly discussions in which students responded to each other about their ideas.

Collaborating With the Instructor

The next part of the collaborating theme that participants experienced more than other themes was collaborating with the online composition instructor outside of the class, which led to them gaining additional knowledge about essay writing as they were able to ask the instructor questions about writing. The related code discussed was students collaborating with their online composition instructor for help leading to new learning. Participants 1, 5, 7, and 9 expressed their experiences collaborating with their online composition instructor for additional help with essays in the online environment, some of which they had to create and upload a video of themselves reading them as a part of the online class discussion where they worked with their peers to further learning about the assignment topic. Participants expressed having positive experiences in collaborating with the instructor one-on-one in which they helped the participant edit her essay to improve it. For example, Participant 1 first defined collaborating in learning and then gave an example:

Collaborating in learning is like with me taking my English class and collaborating with my instructor and telling her what I'm having trouble with, and [she] helped me by set up meetings with me to, you know, break it down more and advised me to get tutoring session if I need it to make me stronger.

Theme 2: Utilizing Technology

The next most prevalent theme that emerged and addressed the RQ about rural students' experiences with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college was utilizing technology. This theme also emerged in the literature review. Connectivism states "learning may reside in non-human appliances" (Siemens, 2005) or technological devices. The vastness of technology can motivate individuals to seek additional knowledge. Another principle of connectivism states that teachers use technological tools in the classroom to facilitate learning (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2005). Participants of this study described their experiences gaining additional knowledge because of the required use of technology in the online classroom.

Seven participants discussed being required to utilize technology to learn about assigned course topics, such as how to use online platforms like the D2L learning management system or YouTube to create videos and conduct research. For instance, Participant 2 described how the instructor assigned the class stories or scenarios to write a 3- to 5-page paper. He required students to first watch a video tutorial on how to submit a paper after researching the topic. The participant stated she was not a good writer and expressed her difficulties with researching. She said she "figured out" course lessons for herself after rereading online information several times. Some participants described the instructor's requirement that students utilize technology to record a video of themselves to respond to the weekly online discussion assignment to share different ideas about assigned topics. Participant 5 said,

He allowed us to record off our phones, but if you did not have a phone, you could record off a laptop or whatever you did your work off of. He did require—some people didn't do it—but he did require your face to be in the camera.

Participant 9 echoed having this experience of utilizing technology to collaborate with others via video. Students exchanging ideas about topics led to them gaining a better understanding of the topic from their peers because they offered different perspectives and new information.

Summary

Chapter 4 revealed how the interview data collected and analyzed aligns with the RQ about what rural students experienced in an online composition class at a 2-year college. To an extent, all participants had some experiences with connectivism in the composition class. Six out of the eight participants experienced collaborating with other students for learning, and four participants experienced collaborating with the online composition instructor. Seven participants experienced being required to use technology in the online class to aid in learning, whether it was via computer or laptop to watch or record videos where they collaborated with the instructor or peers.

Chapter 5 begins with an introduction and includes an interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future studies, social change implications, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in an online composition course at a 2-year college. A basic qualitative study was conducted to collect interview data from eight participants, ages 18 or older, who completed an online composition course at any Southern 2-year college in the United States. In the study, rural students were asked open-ended, semistructured interview questions about their experiences. Two themes emerged, revealing that, to some extent, participants experienced collaborating with students or the online composition instructor or utilizing technology. Next, I detail the interpretation of the study's findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for future studies, implications for social change and professional practice, and the conclusion.

Interpretation of the Findings

The study's findings confirm themes found while researching recent peer-reviewed journals for the literature review. In the following section, each of the two themes is summarized and interpreted based on the conceptual framework and the literature review's findings about students' learning experiences in online college composition courses.

Theme 1: Collaborating

The theme collaborating reflects participants' experiences using technology to share ideas and differing perspectives with other students and to interact with their online composition instructor, which led to new knowledge on assigned topics. Participants

expressed how interacting with others through discussion prompts was needed in the online classroom environment where they were not face-to-face with the instructor in a traditional classroom setting. This online collaboration was helpful to students who described the additional information they learned from others about topics as well as the new perspectives they gained by replying to their peers and asking their instructor for additional help outside of the class platform. Participants described how collaborating with the instructor one-on-one via video conferencing or phone call was beneficial in learning how to write essays.

Relevance to Connectivism

Collaborating as a theme aligned with Siemens's (2005) and Downes's (2005) theory, indicating that participants had some experiences with connectivism as students in an online composition class at a 2-year college. Connectivism states that individuals acquire knowledge by forming connections with others through technology. A principle of connectivism that the first theme aligns with states that teachers allow different opinions in the classroom to facilitate an interchange of ideas (Siemens, 2005). Participants discussed having options for the type of technology to access the course's learning platform and further their knowledge by using technological tools like their computer or cell phone to create videos to share with their classmates. Sharing videos on topics as a part of learning activities was discussed most by participants who expressed how collaborating with others helped increase their knowledge as they discussed differing perspectives on topics and gained new perspectives by exchanging ideas and

information. Through technology, participants were also able to connect and collaborate with their instructor for additional help on topics outside of the course lessons.

Relevance to the Literature Review

The literature review revealed studies about how collaborating with peers or the instructor in online classroom environments benefits learners (Alzain, 2019; Tahili et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2021). Participants expressed that working with other students for discussion assignments helped them to better understand class topics. They described how collaborating with others increased their knowledge because they shared their ideas on topics, and they learned new perspectives and information when peers did the same. This supports Cleary's (2020) study, which found that student interactions encourage engagement in the class and help students become more successful in class. It also supports the research of Brandao and Algarvio (2020), who found when students interact with peers, it contributes to student success as they are able to build upon their knowledge by collaborating with others. The researchers determined that this develops a community of knowledge. Participants also said that collaborating with the online composition instructor one-on-one helped them improve in writing essays. This supports research that found collaborating with teachers to improve student learning (Alzain, 2019). Overall, most participants expressing positive experiences collaborating with students or with the online composition instructor supports research that found that when students collaborate in online learning environments, the quality of education improves (Alzain, 2019; Tahili et al., 2022; Tham et al., 2021).

Theme 2: Utilizing Technology

The second theme reflects participants' experiences in the online composition course where the instructor facilitated their required use of technology to aid in learning. Seven participants described being required to use technology to complete assignments and collaborate with others. As students, they chose the type of technology and gave examples of the assignments that required their use of technology to interact with the instructor or other students to exchange information on topics, which led to them gaining new understanding. For example, one participant had difficulties utilizing technology to navigate between several computer windows to read sources and write her paper. She described using a tablet or more than one computer screen to help, but she later became more comfortable with navigation. Overall, participants described their positive experiences with the ease of utilizing technology in the online composition classroom to work with others in learning activities. Utilizing technology while collaborating with others contributed to student success.

Relevance to Connectivism

The second theme that emerged in this study also aligned with a connectivism principle, indicating that participants experienced connectivism while in the online composition class. One of the theory's principles is that technological tools are used to facilitate learning (Siemens, 2005). Participants' descriptions of their experiences with being required to use technology to share knowledge and learn from others in class discussions aligns with this principle of connectivism. Not only did participants express using technology to access the composition class, but they also mentioned using

technology in learning activities, using their phones to participate in online discussions, and using their computers, laptops, and/or phones to watch lecture videos and to create their own videos to upload to the course. Those videos were shared with peers, who responded about the videos' topics and created their own videos to add their own perspectives on the topics. Technology created opportunities for students to gain additional knowledge when they shared their differing perspectives on topics or when they took advantage of opportunities to discuss their writing with the instructor for editing assistance. In addition, the online composition instructors were knowledgeable scholars with whom learners formed connections and from whom they acquired additional knowledge. This allowed students to learn more about essay writing outside of the course lesson as the instructor gave further details to students one-on-one.

Relevance to the Literature Review

The literature search revealed studies about utilizing technology in online classrooms to exchange knowledge. Participants expressed how utilizing technology, most often in the form of computers or laptops, in the online composition classroom at times convenient for them was necessary for them to complete coursework and learn about topics by sharing knowledge. This supports research on connectivism that revealed how instructional methods, including technology, aid in student learning. Corbett and Spinello's (2020) findings stated that at the center of research on connectivism lies technology. Learners have the power to gain knowledge in different ways and at times they choose because of technology (Utecht & Keller, 2019). Because participants described using computers or laptops for writing assignments and other class work, it

supports research by Martinez et al. (2019), which found that students in online writing courses use laptops more often than other types of technology. Sozudogru et al. (2019) found that when students used technology in online platforms, their motivation increased, which is also a factor of the online learning theme that emerged.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations of this study relate to transferability and researcher bias. The study was open to participants from Southern 2-year colleges in the United States. This limited potential participation because the study targeted students from only one region in the country. This limits the study from being transferable to settings outside of the South. Writing thorough field notes about my data collection process helped me to mitigate this limitation. Targeting the Southern population of rural students could have influenced researcher bias. I chose to recruit Southern 2-year colleges because I wanted to focus on student populations in the region in which I live and have taught online composition to better understand my future students' instructional needs. For an ethical study as the data collection tool and researcher, and to ensure this bias did not impact my role, I did not recruit participants with whom I had a teacher-student relationship. I also wrote my reflective thoughts in a document separate from the interview transcripts.

Another limitation was the possibility of participants being dishonest about their experiences in the online composition class. To reduce this possibility, I asked open-ended questions so participants could give detailed accounts of their experiences. I recorded participants' words, transcribed them verbatim, and had participants verify their accuracy.

Recommendations

Based on this study's findings, I recommend that additional studies be conducted on rural students' experiences in online composition courses at 2-year colleges. More research is still needed on rural students' experiences in online composition courses at 2-year colleges to better understand their instructional needs in online courses (see Love & Mock, 2019). Therefore, I recommend future studies address the following:

1. Studies could explore rural students' experiences in online composition courses at any 2-year college in the United States. This could help bridge the gap in the research and address this study's limitation as it focused only on rural students who lived in the South.
2. Research could explore rural students' experiences with connectivism in any online writing course at a 2-year college because past studies on students' experiences in online writing courses were conducted at 4-year colleges.
3. Future studies could explore how rural students in online composition courses with connectivism perform academically compared to nonrural students at 2-year colleges. This could help researchers, college administrators, and online composition instructors better understand students' instructional needs and how connectivism in the classroom impacts student performance.

Implications

This study provides implications that may inform positive social change, instructional methods, and professional practices. There is a need for research on rural student's experiences in online writing courses (Love & Mock, 2019). The findings of

this study could inform future studies about rural students' experiences in online composition courses. Higher education institutions could apply results to improve instruction in online composition courses to benefit rural students at 2-year colleges.

Social Change, Methodological, and Professional Practice

The results of this study could lead to positive social change for online college students, instructors, administrators, and other higher education stakeholders. The focus was on learning experiences rural students had with connectivism in online writing courses at 2-year colleges as previous students have found that applying connectivism in online courses has led to student success. Knowing rural students' learning experiences in online writing courses was needed to understand their needs so that instructors could better support student learning (Love & Mock, 2019). In this study, I found that, to an extent, when instructors applied connectivism strategies in online composition courses, it helped students understand writing topics. Instructors could use findings to create learning activities that better engage rural students in composition learning activities and motivate them while in the online class, which could also help them in other online classes. In turn, this could increase the college's student success and graduate rates after they successfully complete required online composition courses. Furthermore, rural students could apply critical thinking, writing, and research skills they gain from the course in their future careers. These skills will be helpful when communicating, sharing information, and problem-solving as productive members of their communities.

Conclusion

Researchers have found that rural students have lower participation in online college classes and programs than nonrural students (LeBeau et al., 2020; Welser et al., 2019). Studies have been conducted about the experiences of students in general in online writing classes at 4-year institutions (Al-Maawali, 2022; Alzain, 2019; Xu & Du, 2021). However, no studies were specific to rural students' learning experiences in the online composition course at a 2-year college.

The purpose of my basic qualitative study was to investigate what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college. According to Siemens's and Downes's (2005) learning theory connectivism, individuals gain knowledge by forming connections with other learners, knowledgeable scholars, researchers, and practitioners through technology. Results confirmed that when teachers use connectivism strategies in online classrooms, student learning is positively impacted (Alzain, 2019; Cleary, 2020; Sozudogru et al., 2019; Tham et al., 2021; Xu & Du, 2021). This study's findings contribute to research about rural students' experiences in online writing courses at 2-year colleges.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

My purpose is to explore what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college.

Interview questions:

1. Describe your learning experiences in the online composition class.

Probe: Can you tell me more?

2. What does collaborating in learning mean to you?

Probe: What about working with others, is that part of it?

3. Describe your collaborative experiences in the course.

Probe: Describe your collaborative experiences with other students.

Probe: Describe your collaborative experiences with the course instructor.

Probe: Describe your collaborative experiences with other instructors.

Probe: Describe your collaborative experiences with other school personnel.

4. Describe how the lessons in your course were presented to you.

Probe: How and by whom were the lessons designed?

5. What do you know about sharing knowledge?

Probe: Describe any experiences you have with sharing knowledge in the online composition class.

Probe: How and with whom did you share knowledge?

6. Describe your experiences with technology.

Probe: How was it used in the course?

7. What does the term “network” mean to you?

Probe: Describe any experiences you have with using networks in the online composition class.

Probe: What else would you like to share about your learning experiences in the online composition course?

Appendix B: Pre- and Post-Interview Script

Thank you for your participation in this study. I did receive your consent form stating that I have permission to record today's interview. Is that correct? As a reminder, your participation is voluntary and confidential.

The purpose of my study is to investigate what, if any, experiences rural students had with connectivism in the online composition course at a 2-year college. The interview will last no longer than 45 minutes, and I will ask about your experiences related to the theory of connectivism being used in the online composition class. Connectivism is a learning theory that says knowledge is gained by making connections with other students, with the professor, with researchers, or through experts, but through technology.

Conduct Interview

That was the last interview question I have for you. I thank you so much for your time and participation. Do you have any questions or concerns for me?

If no...

If you have any questions later, please don't hesitate to reach out to me via email or phone.

Provide contact information.

I hope you have a great day.