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A Phenomenological Study of Social Science Instructors' Assessment Practices for Online Learning

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COLLEGE OF SOCIAL AND BEHAVIORAL SCIENCES

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Cynthia Dietrich

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
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Abstract

Online learning has revolutionized higher education in the United States. In 2007, there were 3.9 million students taking at least 1 online course. Assessment in online instruction is a new experience for teachers because of the recent advent of online course delivery. Current research on online learning does not address instructor experiences with learning assessments. This gap may contribute to online instructors being inadequately prepared to teach online. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore online instructors' experiences with assessments in their undergraduate social science courses. The study was guided by constructivism as well as theories associated with assessment for the college classroom. The main and secondary research questions focused on the participants' experiences with assessment in the online learning environment and the challenges and benefits of assessment in that learning environment. Data were collected with in-depth, semistructured interviews and analyzed via Moustakas's modification of van Kaam's method. The main themes are: (a) instructors use a combination of assessment practices, (b) changes to assessments are based on student feedback, and (c) academic honesty. The present study promotes positive social change by providing members of the online learning community with a better understanding of instructors' assessment processes, as well as the challenges and benefits those instructors face in assessing learning in online classes, all of which may contribute to improved instruction for online students.

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Dedication

For Paul, and PJ, Hanna, William, and Suzanna.

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I would like to acknowledge the immense contributions of my chairperson, Dr. Robin Friedman. She has supported my efforts throughout my entire process, pushing me to improve the quality of my work. From our first meeting through e-mail, Dr. Friedman pressed me to explain my ideas, helping me to refine my thinking and improve the quality of my expressions. Dr. Friedman's expertise has been invaluable for my growth as a scholar and researcher.

I would also like to recognize my committee member, Dr. Gene Rorhbaugh. Just when I thought my head would explode, I met Dr. Rorhbaugh at a residency. After talking with Dr. Rorhbaugh for just a few minutes, I believed I was going to be successful in my dissertation process. For that, I will be forever appreciative.

Also, I'd like to recognize the instructors who took time away from their busy schedule to talk with me. Their contributions to this project have been invaluable. I appreciate that they were busy, yet they took time away to share their experiences to contribute to what we know about assessment in online learning.

I value my dear Walden friend, Lee. Our countless hours on the phone talking shop provided me with a connection to a *real person*. I appreciate her true friendship.

There are not enough words to express how thankful I am for my family's support as I have gone though my research and dissertation. My mom and dad have always encouraged me to work my hardest, without which this would never have been possible. My husband and children have been amazing. They have encouraged me and supported me with a love like no other. Without their support and understanding, I would never

have been able to accomplish this feat. This work embodies *our* accomplishment, because together, we're better.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Background to the Study

Online learning has revolutionized higher education. Individuals are now able to attend college not only by attending a traditional brick and mortar college but also by using the Internet. Online education offers the opportunity of higher education to a wide range of students, such as mothers with small children and working professionals in geographically remote areas (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009). Many of those people would not otherwise be able to attend traditional programs of higher education, which may have contributed to the immense growth of online education. Since its inception, online education has shown significant growth (Allen & Seaman, 2007b, 2008). In 2007, there were roughly 3.9 million students registered in online undergraduate courses, representing a 13% increase from 2006 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). As the size of the online student body increases, it is essential to maintain quality and best practices, because the quality of online education is as important as it is in face-to-face classrooms. Institutions of higher education must form and refine high quality instructional practices, developed through research, regardless of delivery (Kinne & Eastep, 2008).

Research on online education is somewhat limited with respect to some aspects of teaching online, such as assessment. Arend (2007) observed, "Perhaps the most promising and understudied aspect of online education is course assessment" (p. 3). A critical literature review revealed a significant gap in the present literature regarding

student assessments in online learning from the instructors' perspective (Arend, 2007; Boerema, Stanley, & Westhorp, 2007). Some research regarding online instruction offers readers a comparison of traditional education and online education (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Donavant, 2009; Li & Irby, 2008; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Smith & Mitry, 2008; Ulmer, Watson, & Derby, 2007; see also Wyatt, 2005). Other research has addressed various aspects of online education, such as concerns regarding quality (Baglione & Nasetanski, 2007; Choi & Park, 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2007), technology (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Smith & Mitry, 2008), and testing, assessment, and evaluation (Fish & Gill, 2009; Grijalva et al., 2006). An in-depth discussion of the literature review will be presented in chapter 2.

Problem Statement

The literature on learning indicates that the learning process relies to a great extent on student assessment (Johnson, 2008; Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007). Assessment, both formative and summative, is the process of measuring students' learning to inform instruction (Reeves, 2006). Assessments are used to inform students (Challis, 2005; Kinne & Eastep, 2008; Russell et al., 2006), inform instructors (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Reeves, 2006; Wolsey, 2008; Young, 2006) motivate learners (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Boerema et al., 2007; Cauley & McMillan, 2010), and encourage active learning (Dengler, 2008; Jowallah, 2008). According to Arend (2008), assessment is a challenging aspect of constructing online undergraduate classes. Additionally, Vonderwell et al. (2007) argued that assessments must be designed to meet the specific learning needs of online learners.

The process of assessing student learning is a unique experience for undergraduate instructors who teach online classes. A search of relevant literature, discussed in detail in chapter 2, revealed that there is a gap in the current body of research regarding instructor experiences of assessment in online education (Arend, 2008; Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010; Boerema et al., 2007). It is important that instructors avail themselves of opportunities to learn more about assessments in the online learning environment by consulting the literature, yet this significant gap exists. Consequently, there is a notable problem: Instructors may be unprepared or underprepared to assess online learning. The present phenomenological study addresses the gap in research and provides a rich description of online instructors' experiences in the area of assessments in online education, in addition to the challenges and benefits that online instructors experience in assessing online learning.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the present phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of psychology instructors who teach online regarding assessments that are used to evaluate leaning outcomes in an online learning environment. In addition, instructors' challenges with assessing learning were revealed in the present study. The analysis focused on the essence of the instructors' experiences regarding assessment in online learning environments. Instructors, administrators, and curriculum specialists have been informed about the perceptions of online social science teachers. The present study provided educators with complete and rich descriptions of teachers' experiences with assessment in online learning from professionals in the field (Eun, 2008; Laker,

Laker, & Lea, 2008). By examining the literature, identifying the gap, and completing the present research, the hope was that instruction and assessment in online undergraduate courses will be improved in the future. As a result, students enrolled in online courses will benefit from improved instruction. Because the online learning community is so vast, the present research has the power to transform the online learning experience for many students.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative methodology was used for the study. Generally, qualitative research methods include interviews, observations, document data collection, and text and image analysis (Creswell, 2003). Qualitative research is based on five philosophical assumptions: Reality is subjective; researchers are highly effective when they are immersed in the context of the phenomenon; research is value laden; language is familiar and may be subjective; and research is often inductive, beginning with observation and details and moving to theory and generalizations (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).

Qualitative research is telling. The individuals under consideration are more than numbers; their stories are shared and realized in the context from which the stories have emerged. Qualitative research traditions are applied to research that seeks to understand the human experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Individuals often perceive themselves in a different way than the world sees them. Through qualitative research methods, people are able to describe their unique understanding and knowledge concerning the phenomenon being researched (Moustakas, 1994). One important benefit of qualitative research is that personal experiences and reflection are not lost in the data.

The most common qualitative research traditions, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, phenomenology, and biography, are labor and time intensive and require a commitment to revealing information germane to the primary objectives, which differ within each tradition (Creswell, 2007).

In the present study, qualitative research techniques were used to gather the personal experiences of online instructors. While there are differences between teaching in traditional face to face settings and teaching online (Andresen, 2009), qualitative research uncovered the finer, more discrete perceptions and reasoning of undergraduate instructors who teach in an online classroom and the challenges those instructors face regarding assessments (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenology was the specific qualitative approach taken in the present research. Moustakas (1994) established phenomenology as a valuable research design applicable to research in the social sciences. According to Moustakas, phenomenology is based on an individual's experiences in the context of the phenomena and the contextual elements influence the individual's experiences of the phenomena. Creswell (2007) indicated that phenomenology is a suitable method when the researcher hopes to understand a phenomenon in an effort to develop best practices, policies or both. The goal of this study was to richly describe the experiences of online, social science instructors with regard to the assessment practices. The study detailed the instructors' thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of assessments in the online learning environment, and uncovered the challenges online instructors confront by obtaining textual descriptions of their experiences through in-depth interviews.

The interview questions served to collect and explore the experiences of instructors teaching online psychology courses. The phenomenological approach illuminated why instructors use assessments in particular ways. Further detailed information and rationalization concerning design is provided in chapter 3. Phenomenology was used because it was the most appropriate approach to understand the perceptions of online instructors regarding assessment tools they used in an online learning environment and the value those instructors placed on assessments. Teachers construct their instruction based on their education and experience; therefore, understanding instructors' experiences through the phenomenological tradition was a beneficial way to explore the thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of online instructors and the challenges they experience in assessing online learning (Creswell, 2007; Eun, 2008).

Research Questions

In phenomenology, interviews, document reviews, observations, and art are used in collecting data (Moustakas, 1994). The present study included in-depth interviews. Moustakas (1994) contended that a solid research question strives to uncover the essence of human experiences, realizes the qualitative nature of experiences rather than the quantitative, and engages the researcher in a personal way. Qualitative questions do not predict or establish causal relationships (Creswell, 2003). Finally, data collected are shared through rich descriptions and detailed experiences.

The main research question was: What is the experience of online undergraduate instructors regarding assessment practices in undergraduate social science classes? A

secondary question addressed the perceived challenges and benefits of assessment practices in the online learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

The present study was guided by two theories: constructivism and assessment theory for college classrooms. There was literature that supported the use of constructivism as a means to frame the research project on online education (Legg, Adelman, & Levitt, 2007; Taber, 2008). The premise of constructivism is that people learn new knowledge and understand new experiences in the context of what has been previously learned and experienced (Gordon, 2009). According to the tenants of constructivism, learning is an active and conscious process through which people reflect and actively construct meaning.

The study profited from the experiences of online instructors with experience of at least one year of online instruction. The application of constructivist principles assumed that teachers are learners, particularly as they undertake their roles as online instructors. Individuals experience the act of teaching in differing ways, depending on their training, experiences, perceptions, and how they integrate new approaches into their preexisting framework (Eun, 2008; Laker et al., 2008). As a result, each person creates a very individualized approach to assessment in the online learning environment and values particular assessment tools in the context of their personal experiences.

The constructivist principles served as a perspective through which to view the present research. The research process was ongoing and contextualized my experiences as a teacher and online student. In the course of the phenomenological research process,

my experiences were bracketed; however, the construction of knowledge was not value free or absent of previous knowledge (Creswell, 2007). The exact process of validity and reliability is explained in chapter 3.

Assessment theory for college classrooms is a general theory in which Brookhart (2004) outlined various aspects of assessment of learning. Assessment theory distinguishes between assessment and evaluation. Assessment refers to activities used to collect information regarding student learning for some educational purpose; whereas evaluation includes a judgment about the information collected (Brookhart, 2004). Also, assessment theory includes the following assessment processes: (a) knowledge of assessment options, (b) knowledge of how to choose and construct particular assessments that will be used to assess learning, (c) recognition of how to use the assessments appropriately to get the most accurate and helpful information, (d) knowledge of how to interpret the information collected through assessment, and (e) the ability to use the information to teach material and benefit students. This cycle is dynamic and should be followed through the final step. Using the results is essential to the entire learning process (Brookhart, 2004).

In addition to the assessment cycle, there are other important premises of assessment in college classrooms included in the general assessment theory. Assessment is used to drive learning. Assessment includes quantitative and qualitative information. Instructors plan assessments and use the results to offer students some type of feedback, make instructional choices, assign grades, and advise students concerning additional

courses or career paths. The present research study used assessment theory as a conceptual framework through which to understand the perspective of online instructors.

Definitions of Research Terminology

Feedback: Commentary offered to the students concerning what they have done well and what areas they must address; sometimes comments offer suggestions or demonstration of how the learners correct their mistakes (Wiliam et al., 2004; Vonderwell et al., 2007). Feedback offers instructors and learners information concerning how well students are meeting established learning goals and course objectives. Feedback is distinguished from evaluation in that feedback is used to offer students evidence of how well they have reached the learning goals, without evaluation or grades (Brookhart, 2005).

Formative assessments: assessments used to inform the instructor and students regarding progress toward meeting learning goals and objectives. Formative assessments are used to measure how well students understand the material, with the aim of improving instruction, providing learners with a comprehensive understanding of the material, and offering students feedback concerning their learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, 2004; see also Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Formative assessment functions as a conduit between the present and future of student learning (Sharkman, 2006).

In-service teachers: teachers who are currently working as a teacher. The experiences and training of in-service teachers varies greatly (Darling-Hammond &

Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Some in-service teachers have completed a formal preparatory program, whereas others have not.

Learning outcomes: statements that explain what students are expected to learn as a result of instruction. The statements are specific and measurable.

Online learning community: a group of individuals who convene on the Internet platform to accomplish common educational goals. Members of the online community include students, instructors, facilitators, curricular specialists, and administrators.

Online learning environment: the virtual classroom where students participate in online learning. The present research was focused on instructor perceptions concerning the online learning environment, where all instruction occurs via the internet, with no face-to-face component. The online learning environment includes all aspects of the classroom, including the classroom platform, in which threaded asynchronous discussions are held, administrative duties are tended to, and material and assignments are posted. Other terms that have interchangeable meaning are web-based learning environment, virtual classroom, computer-mediated distance learning environment, distance learning, and e-learning environment (Smart & Cappel, 2006).

Preservice teachers: individuals who are enrolled in teacher preparatory programs. The individuals may be enrolled in undergraduate or graduate programs; degreed or certificated programs. Preservice teachers are individuals who are preparing to enter the field either in a traditional way, through an undergraduate program in teaching, or through an alternative route, with little to no training in instructional methods (Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007).

Summative assessments: assessments answer the question, "What has the student learned?" Summative assessments are employed to establish if students have met the predetermined learning objectives (Colburn, 2009). Summative assessments are often administered at the end of a chapter, unit, or school year; and assume the form of fill in the blank questions, multiple choice items, or other standardized testing methods. Instruction is not changed as a result of outcomes on summative assessments; grades are assigned as a result of summative assessment (Brookhart, 2004).

Scope, Assumptions, and Limitations

The present study was limited to between 15 and 20 undergraduate instructors who teach social sciences courses in an online learning environment. The study included community college instructors and teachers from 4-year nonprofit institutions. The study included important assumptions and limitations as well.

Assumptions

There were several assumptions made in the research process. In the present study, participants supplied the length and scope of their experiences teaching online, including their responsibility for course construction. All self-reported information was assumed to be true. That is, it was assumed that participants have earned a master's or terminal degree in the area in which they will share their experiences, they have taught in an online learning environment for a minimum of one year, and they are responsible for constructing all aspects of the online course(s) that they teach.

In addition to the assumptions regarding the participants, there were primary assumptions of the theoretical framework. It was assumed, through the data analysis, that

the participants have constructed their knowledge about assessments in online instruction in the context of their teacher preparatory program and experiences and as a result of consultations with colleagues. Lastly, it was assumed that the number of participants provided adequate information to understand the instructors' perceptions in sufficient detail to reflect the essence of their experiences through rich and complete description.

Limitations

The present study was limited for several reasons. The scope of the project included only nonprofit institutions, which represents only a portion of instructors teaching in the online learning environment. The number of participants was small when compared to the considerable number of instructors who teach online (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

In addition to the limitations due to size and scope of the present research project, there was some limitation of interpretation, because school policy or the learning platform may impact the assessments that instructors use and the values those instructors place on assessment as a learning tool (Snyder, 2009). This limitation is noteworthy, because instructors may want to assess learning in particular ways but feel restricted due to school policy. As a result, instructors' training might conflict with their experiences, which may impact their construction of knowledge or conceptualization of assessments in online instruction. Black and Wiliam (1998) argued that there is disconnect between what teachers believe they should do and what they actually do in practice. This limitation was significant as it restricted the interpretation of the instructors' experiences, which limited the researcher's understanding of the interviews.

Another limitation was the validity of the study. According to Creswell (2007), validation is defined as the methods used to authenticate the accuracy of the findings, the process of which lends credibility to the research. Threats to credibility included that (a) the researcher was a student in an online program throughout the study, and (b) the written accounts may not adequately reflect the instructors' perceptions. Therefore, it was essential that the findings be validated (Creswell, 2007). Several checks were used to validate the findings, including member checking, and rich description. A further discussion of this issue is presented in chapter 3.

Significance of the Study

A gap in the literature exists concerning the experiences of undergraduate, social science instructors who teach online, specifically in the area of classroom assessments in the online learning environment. Addressing the gap was essential because currently available research indicated that how instructors perceive assessment may significantly influence how learning is assessed and the value instructors assign to assessment as a learning tool (Arend, 2007; Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007). The present study addressed this gap through discussions with instructors who teach online. Shared lived experience informed other pre- and in-service instructors, as well as administrators, curriculum designers, and students.

There are important professional applications for the present study. The research findings offer future instructors a better picture of assessment in the online learning environment; which may improve the experience for some instructors and help face to face instructors realize the value of teaching online. Additionally, the present discourse

on instructor perceptions has contributed to instructor development for individuals teaching online. Research indicates that teachers rely to some extent on the support of other professionals serving in the field (Eun, 2008; Laker et al., 2008). As a result, the present study offers pre- and in-service instructors a sense of community and support. As pre-service or in-service online instructors read the findings of the study, those individuals will gain a greater understanding of what other professionals do when teaching in a similar environment. The increased understanding that inservice instructors have regarding teaching online may prompt self-reflection.

In addition to professional development for instructors, the present study has professional implications for administrators, particularly as online learning grows. Presently, roughly 66% of all universities offer online courses and 55% offer online degreed programs (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Therefore, it is essential that institutional decision makers be aware of program and course curriculum and instructional approaches used in the online learning environment (Lisi, 2006).

The present study provides administrators, curriculum specialists, and policy makers with a rich understanding of instructor thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions regarding assessment in online teaching and the challenges online instructors face. As one essential aspect of instructional design, it is valuable for those professionals who are involved in establishing policy to understand what may be happening in online courses, pertaining to assessment and instructor experiences, so that decisions and policies are well informed and sensible (Lisi, 2006).

Positive Social Change

There are a number of vested stakeholders in the present discussion on instructor experiences with assessment in online learning. With this in mind, the present research is valuable and has implications for positive social change. Interested parties include teachers, both in-service and pre-service; administrators and policy makers; and students. Millions of individuals worldwide comprise the online learning community, representing a massive financial collective (Allen & Seaman, 2008). As previously discussed, research concerning online learning is relatively unexplored and limited in scope. The present work contributes to the currently available knowledge concerning aspects of teaching in an online class, which offers all members of the online learning communication enlightenment concerning the topic of higher education in an online format.

Research has plainly established that assessment has a positive influence on learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; see also Wiliam et al., 2004). Furthermore, online learning is a lasting movement in education (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Therefore, it is essential that teachers explore assessment in online education. Stories shared about the lived experiences of online instructors inform pre- and in-service teachers, concerning the role assessment plays in online learning. Research indicates that teachers use collaboration with colleagues as sources of information to inform their professional development (Eun, 2008; Herrington et al., 2009; Laker et al., 2008). Consequently, it is reasonable to conclude that when pre- and in-service teachers read the present work, they will become partners in the training process

through an individually guided activity (Eun, 2008). As a result, the present research informs those instructors and provides encouragement for self-reflection and innovation.

In addition to impacting educators, the present discourse positively transforms the experiences of students who participate in undergraduate courses offered online through better instruction. In keeping with student-centered learning, effective assessment approaches endorse learning, so that the gap between the learning goals and objectives is narrowed (Biggs, 1996). Stoloff et al. (2004) pointed out that the United States is in a very uncertain position in the global economy; therefore, educational programs must develop and train lifelong, capable learners, who are able to positively contribute to communal global sustainability. Improved instruction is the gateway to better learning and future successes in education and the work world.

Summary and Transition

In summary, there is a gap in the literature concerning student assessment in online learning from the perspective of instructors. The qualitative research approach was beneficial, as this topic is new and not well understood (Creswell, 2003). Currently, little research available has explored the perspective of the instructor in the online learning environment, specifically concerning assessments of learning (Arend, 2007). A critical literature review was conducted to examine current literature concerning assessment in online learning. Findings of the review, presented in chapter 2, indicate that student assessment significantly impacts learning; and instructors' perceptions of how students incorporate feedback impacts how those instructors use assessments to assess learning. Research specifically on the use of qualitative traditions in research on

higher education and research specifically pertaining to online learning was reviewed and is assimilated in chapter 2. Qualitative research, from the phenomenological tradition, is meritorious for topics for which little research exists (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Sharing the lived experiences of instructors in the online learning community is beneficial because it offers the opportunity to realize the experienced instructors' perspectives (Creswell, 2007). Finally, the conceptual framework, which provided the backdrop for the present research, was explored through a critical literature review (Gordon, 2009). The lived experiences of online instructors were understood in the context of the constructivist theoretical framework. The present study will contribute professional knowledge to support teaching and learning in an online learning environment.

Implications for future research and social change were explored. Chapter 3 explained and rationalized the research methodology for this study. The phenomenological research design was discussed in depth as well as other qualitative research designs. All findings of the study were presented in chapter 4. Finally, chapter 5 presented a discussion of how the findings for this study relate to the larger body of literature on assessment in online learning, as well as recommendations for action and future study, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This study depicted the experiences of online undergraduate instructors regarding assessment practices in social science classes and portrayed the challenges and benefits of assessment practices in the online learning environment. To understand the context of the research questions and the phenomenon under consideration, a critical literature review was conducted. The first half of the literature review presents online learning and assessment, in addition to the theoretical basis of the present study. The second half of the review includes literature pertaining to emergent themes, as well as literature relating to the qualitative methods that have been used to research online education and learning assessment in higher education.

There is a body of general research on online learning, including prevalence, benefits, and challenges that was uncovered through a critical literature review. The literature review presents research findings situated in a comparison of the similarities and differences between learning in traditional learning environment with online learning. A discussion of assessment, including formative and summative, is presented. The learning value of assessments in online learning is offered as a foundation to understand the experiences of instructors teaching online. The literature review established that assessment in online education serves to inform students (Challis, 2005; Russell, Elton, Swinglehurst, & Greenhalgh, 2006), inform instructors (Johnson, 2008; Reeves, 2006), motivate learners (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009), and promote active learning (Dengler, 2008).

The literature revealed two conceptual frameworks, assessment theory for college classrooms and constructivism, which offer the researcher and readers a way of understanding the data collected through in-depth interviews. Constructive alignment serves as a related theory that supports and contextualizes the findings (Biggs, 1996). A broad discussion of themes found in literature concerning assessment in online learning is presented. The themes explored include quality, technology, and testing, and assessment. Also presented are studies related to the research approach other researchers have used to investigate online learning and assessment in higher education in the online learning environment.

Search Strategy

The critical literature review was conducted over a period of 1 year. The online EBSCO databases that were searched included Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Premier, Education Research Complete, ERIC, Education: Sage Journals, PsycARTICLES, SocINDEX with Full Text, MEDLINE and Teacher Reference Center. Relevant keywords that were searched included the following: *online learning, assessment, constructivism, social connectedness, learning community, technology, instructional design, academic honesty, online education, distance education, learning, motivation, active learning, community of practice, online instruction,* and *constructive alignment*, as well as combinations of those terms.

The search of those keywords generated a significant number of articles. To narrow the focus further, limiters were used; for example, when searching *assessment*, only learning assessments were included. Limiters were also used to selectively include

scholarly materials. Only peer-reviewed sources were included in the database searches. The references cited in relevant peer-reviewed articles were also searched, read, and incorporated where appropriate. Articles not available in the Walden library were requested through interlibrary loans. Also, relevant books were purchased and used in the literature review. Table 1 presents details on the resources that were used for the literature review.

Table 1

Summary of Search Results by Topic

Topic	Peer-reviewed articles	Books	Annual reports
Online learning	27	0	2
Online vs traditional learning	11	0	0
Assessment	14	1	0
Role of assessment in learning	16	0	0
Constructivism	16	3	0
Assessment theory	2	0	0
Constructive alignment	3	0	0
Research methodology	1	2	0
Totals	90	6	2

Online Learning

Online education, with roots in correspondence courses, emerged over a decade ago (Allen & Seaman, 2008; Ulmer et al., 2007). Since its inception, online education has exploded. Distance learning has emerged and grown rapidly in part due to the fact that personal computers are more affordable and the Internet is more accessible for the masses (Ulmer et al., 2007). According to Allen and Seaman (2008), more than 20% of students enrolled in higher education have taken at least one online course. In the fall of 2007, this percentage equated to nearly 4 million students. Of those students, the

majority are undergraduate students (84%). Approximately 66% of all universities offer online courses and 55% offer online degreed programs (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). While there was a gradual leveling of the number of new institutions of higher education that made online offerings available between 2003 and 2007, the number of schools that will increase the size and scope of their online courses and programs is expected to continue to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2007b).

As a result of the increase in size and scope of online learning, improving the quality of classes and programs already in place is important and will result in improved educational experiences for all members of the online learning community. Online learning offers students and instructors flexibility of time and place (Li & Irby, 2008). Students are able to learn at their convenience; around their career responsibilities, family obligations, and community responsibilities; and from a distance (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Fish & Gill, 2009). This benefit of flexibility of time and space extends to instructors as well. Instructors are able to work in their profession while teaching during their free time.

Universities that offer online courses offer other benefits as well. These universities are more focused on retention and graduation for their students when compared to more traditional formats for higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2007b). Also, universities with online offerings provide higher education and professional development opportunities to students not traditionally able to take advantage of higher education, such as those individuals who have work and family obligations, or people with disabilities that prevent them from attending a traditional program (Allen & Seaman, 2007b; Li & Irby, 2008). Online courses are important for strategic planning.

Universities with online offerings are able to attract more students, generating more growth and revenue, based on an increased perceived value over schools that do not have online offerings, which also may enable them to attract students who might not otherwise have attended the school (Allen & Seaman, 2007a). Finally, universities with online courses are able to attract students from all over the world (Allen & Seaman, 2007a).

Online Learning Versus Traditional Courses

There are several notable aspects of online learning that are important to understand in the context of the present study. A broad understanding of online learning, including a general overview of similarities and differences between online and traditional education, benefits the reader in the future discussions on assessment in online learning.

Similarities with Face-to-Face (f2f) Classes

Important, fundamental pedagogical similarities exist between online and f2f classes (Johnson, 2008). Experienced online instructors find that some teaching methods are transferable from traditional classes to online classes; such as assigned reading material, class wide and small group discussions, and a heavy reliance on written work. These instructional techniques are characteristic of the majority of traditional and online courses. In online and f2f classes, assessment is used to drive and evaluate students' learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Assessments present instructors with instructional design challenges for both online and f2f instruction (Kinne & Eastep, 2008). Also, the course syllabus serves as a road map in both online and f2f instruction (Abdous & He, 2008). The key to instruction, in both learning environments, is engaging learners and

clearly communicating expectations. Despite these general similarities between f2f classes and those offered online, online education also has distinctive characteristics (Andresen, 2009).

Differences with f2f Classes

One obvious difference between online learning and traditional f2f learning is the physical distance between the instructors and the students (Li & Irby, 2008; Moore, 1997). This difference, labeled "transactional distance" (Moore, 1997, p. 22), seems obvious on the surface but has significant implications for instruction. It is more than merely a physical distance. Transactional distance is encompassed by a psychological distance between instructors, their students and the material, marked by the potential for miscommunication and educational misunderstandings between instructors and their students (Moore, 1997). Moore (1997) explained that transactional distance experienced by members of the online learning environment varies from person to person. This distance is important to realize because there is an important body of literature on online learning that indicates that training is an essential aspect of the development of online instructors (Choi, & Park, 2006; Woo & Reeves, 2008). The implication is that it is valuable for instructors to learn how to effectively communicate with their students.

Early in the history of online education, Moore (1997) argued that communication difficulty was one aspect of the transactional distance experienced by the members of the online learning community. More recently, researchers have argued that communication is improved as a result of learning online (Li & Irby, 2008; Singh & Pan, 2004). The enhanced communication is likely due to improved systems and technological

advancements not previously available (Li & Irby, 2008). The implication is that as technology advances, the experiences of online learners and their teachers will evolve as well. The improved communication provides students and instructors with an indelible record of assigned tasks, feedback, and grades, which may help to bridge the transactional distance that may exist in online education (Li & Irby, 2008). One potential positive outcome of improved communication is that instructors may be able to reduce or eliminate the perceived distance that students experience as they work in an online learning environment.

In addition to transactional distance and improved communication, another difference between online and f2f learning is that online education relies to a large extent on asynchronous, threaded discussion (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). Students are able to read and reread the discussion posts, which is different from traditional classrooms. In f2f classes, once the discussion is over, the positions assumed and the points made during the discussion may not be read or reviewed; students rely on their perceptions and memory of the f2f discussion, which may not actually represent what, was being said. In addition, because of the asynchronous nature of many discussions conducted online, the students have the ability to consult the literature; consider the research in the context of their personal experiences and professional knowledge; and construct an argument based on reflection and critical thinking (Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007). Therefore, the learning benefit of discussions in the traditional classroom setting may be different than it is in the online class (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Kanuka et al., 2007).

The learning differences, as noted specifically with respect to discussions, have significant impact on the instructional approaches and assessment practices of online teachers. Since the inception of online learning, studies have been conducted to understand the phenomenon, develop and improve instruction, and realize best practices in online education (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Boerema et al., 2007; Choi & Park, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Scagnoli, Buki, & Johnson, 2009). Researchers indicated that instructors often taught in traditional learning environments before transitioning to teaching in the online setting (Choi & Park, 2006; Scagnoli et al., 2009). As a result, many novice online instructors attempted to apply f2f instructional methods to the online environment. Choi and Park (2006) concluded that very quickly, those instructors found that while there are some basic similarities between teaching in f2f and online classes; teaching in the online environment is qualitatively different from teaching in the traditional environment. Educators and researchers have noted that when teachers shift from the traditional to the online setting, a fundamental shift in teaching philosophy is necessary (Choi & Park, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Rabe-Hemp Woollen, & Humiston, 2009). That is, online instruction requires a more student centered perspective, when compared to traditional settings. The result of a student centered teaching philosophy includes less reliance on summative assessment and more emphasis on formative assessment (Wiliam & Black, 2004).

Assessments

Assessments are tools and classroom activities used to appraise students' evolution toward educational goals and objectives, and transform instruction and learning

to reach the learning goals and objectives (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Used by instructors and students, assessments offer information and guidance for future learning. Within the realm of assessment, there are two primary categories of assessments: formative and summative (Colburn, 2009).

Formative Assessment

Formative assessments are used to measure how well students understand the material, with the goal of guiding and refining instruction to help students gain a more meaningful understanding of what was taught (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Formative assessment is used to construct feedback for students. According to Black and Wiliam (1998), feedback is composed of three things: the targeted learning goal, the current status, and a plan for how to move from the present status to the targeted goal. At various points during the learning process, students and instructors use instructor, peer, and self generated feedback to improve and redirect learning. Formative assessment, when effective, serves as a conduit between where students are and where they plan to be (Sharkman, 2006; Wiliam et al., 2004).

Formative assessment comprises the identification of gaps in understanding; useable feedback at all levels of learning; active engagement of the students, who apply feedback that is provided to them; and discreet learning progression toward curriculum objectives and governmental standards (Heritage, 2007). Heritage (2007) contended that closing the gap between the present learners' status and the established learning goals is not an effective use of the data gleaned from learning assessments. Formative assessment should reduce the gap, not altogether eliminate the gap (Heritage, 2007; Vygotsky, 1987).

The gap is beneficial, because it allows students room to learn and also motivates them to work harder and meet higher level learning goals. According to Heritage, instructors must pinpoint the ideal size gap to motivate students, which Vygotsky (1978) labeled as the aone of proximal development.

There is a wide array of valuable approaches that instructors use to identify the learning gap and formatively assess student learning, including pretest/posttest activities (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wininger, 2005), informal observations (Orr, 2005), writing assignments through which instructors generate feedback (Wiliam et al., 2004; Vonderwell et al., 2007), peer assessment (Ngar-Fun & Carless, 2006), and self-evaluations (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Formative assessment may also be incorporated into course design during course construction, such as through revision and grade replacement (Vaden-Goad, 2009). Each approach contributes to learning. Using a varied approach is most beneficial, because it offers students with all learning styles the opportunity to learn in a way that suits their learning style and learning needs (Astleitner, 2005; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Heritage, 2007; Reeves, 2006).

Further, various formative assessment practices offer students an understanding of the link between learning and assessment. In particular, the process of peer review and self-evaluation, as a result of formative feedback, is valuable for students to practice (Black & Wiliam, 1998). When students learn how to evaluate their colleagues' work, in the framework of previously established learning objectives and standards, they will learn how to evaluate their own work in a comparable fashion. Students will be more effective at applying the feedback provided from instructors and peers when they develop these

evaluation skills (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The process of developing peer evaluation and self evaluation skills will bring about a better work product. Moreover, students will become accountable for their own learning and develop into self-directed learners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Summative Assessment

Summative assessments answer the question, "What have students learned?" In the classroom, summative assessments tend to be more traditional assessments, such as tests or quizzes that are used to establish if and how well students have reached the educational objectives, which have directed instruction (Hagstrom, 2006). Summative assessments are typically administered at the end of a unit of study or chapter in a textbook; or at particular points, such as at the end of the course. In the online learning environment, summative assessments may include computer administered quizzes, proctored exams, and research papers. These types of assessments contribute to the composition of students' final grade. Instruction is not often revised as a result of summative assessments (Heritage, 2007).

Although summative assessments are not often used formatively, Wininger (2005) developed a model of assessment called formative summative assessment (FSA) (p. 164). He argued that summative assessments, when used formatively, impact learning. Instructors who use specific techniques following the administration of summative assessments will be able to gather information regarding how well students learned the material. These techniques include reviewing exams in class, prompting students to ask questions, and providing feedback on confusing questions. With the FSA method,

students are afforded the opportunity to construct written arguments explaining their reasoning and answers on particular questions, so they may be awarded more points. According to Wininger, these techniques transform summative assessments into learning opportunities. The FSA model offers instructors rich qualitative and quantitative feedback regarding student achievement, which may help those instructors refine their pedagogical approaches to enhance their students' learning (Wininger, 2005). Wininger reported that students perceived this approach positively, saying it contributed to their learning experience and they would like other instructors to use the same approach. In the online learning environment, the FSA approach may effectively be used through chat rooms or video conferencing, and through other synchronous techniques.

Roles of Assessment in Learning

Assessment is important in the learning process, irrespective of whether learning occurs in f2f or online learning environments. "It influences not only what parts of a course get studied, but also how those parts are studied" (Kirkwood & Price, 2008, p. 8). Assessment in online courses informs students, informs instructors, motivates learners, and encourages active learning.

Informs Students

In online classes, assessment is a powerful tool that informs students concerning all aspects of their courses. Assessment reinforces important content for students by focusing their attention on specific material. Instructors place a higher priority on content and skills they believe are important, and the activities and grade distribution reflect the value assigned to particular content. Additionally, instructors communicate expectations,

with regard to established learning objectives and how to best meet the objectives, through the assessment. Clearly communicated expectations are essential in the online learning environment (Kinne & Eastep, 2008). Assessment informs students as to what instructors' value in terms of work product. For these reasons, assessment helps students determine how to prioritize their time and efforts (Challis, 2005). Students are more likely to invest themselves in learning content and assignments that are emphasized by the instructor, which consequently impacts what and how they learn.

Assessment encourages students to reflect on their own work, prompts them to consider their strengths and weakness, clarify any misunderstandings, challenge their own thinking, and make changes based on assessment outcomes and instructor or peer feedback (Russell, Elton, Swinglehurst, & Greenhalgh, 2006). Assessments focus, refocus, clarify, and verify what the students are learning. In this way, assessment helps students develop metacognitive skills and learn how to self assess and compare their work with the learning objectives and instructor expectations (Kinne & Eastep, 2008). This is an important aspect of assessment, since the reflective process offers students a sense of self efficacy, which is an important facet of learning in higher education, particularly in the online learning environment (Kinne & Eastep, 2008).

Informs Instructors

Assessment also informs instructors. Instructors assess learning to understand how effectively students are learning what is being taught. Assessment generates data that help instructors draw conclusions about their students' work, as well as their own work and communication patterns (Johnson, 2008). When students are not meeting

learning goals and objectives with success, instructors use the assessment findings to tailor their instructional strategies to meet the needs of their students. Assessment is "the lifeblood of good teaching" (Reeves, 2006, p. 300). The assessment process, particularly formative assessment, offers teachers the opportunity to reflect on their instructional strategies and applications, and make changes or improvements to meet their students' changing learning needs and ensure they meet the established learning objectives.

Instructors also use assessment to generate feedback. Feedback is a necessary formative tool that offers students an understanding of how well they are meeting the learning objectives, and ways in which they can improve their work. Feedback is essential to the learning process, when detailed and timely (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007). The research indicated that students appreciate feedback that specifically highlights what was done well and where and how improvements can be made (Wolsey, 2008; Young, 2006). Despite this, instructors hold a dim view of what students do with the feedback given (Arend, 2007). Many instructors do not believe students apply the feedback to future work (Arend, 2007; Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Ulmer et al., 2007). The implication is that instructors may be less inclined to generate specific formative feedback, such as embedded column comments on written work, if they do not believe students appreciate or use the feedback; therefore the learning value of assessments and feedback may be lost in the online learning environment.

Motivates Learners

Learning has historically been the responsibility of the instructor, who imparts knowledge to students. In online learning, students must accept responsibility for their

own learning; while the instructor serves as a facilitator, who encourages and supports the learning process by motivating learners (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009). Consequently, student motivation is a critical aspect of online instruction. Motivation is a particularly important aspect of online instruction. Several instructional approaches, such as providing comments on written assignment, and developing collaborative learning experiences, serve to motivate students (Boerema et al., 2007; Young, 2006). According to Cauley and McMillan (2010), assessment generates feedback that informs students and teachers. Changes made to instruction, as well as changes made by the learner motivate students to improve their understanding of the material and the quality of their work. Then, in an ongoing cycle, assessment is once again conducted to generate new feedback and refine the students' work and instructors' approaches to instruction. This process helps to motivate learners.

While assessment might motivate learners, it can be a double edged sword. For students who receive positive feedback and earn high grades, assessment is engaging and motivating; for students who receive negative feedback and earn lower grades, assessment may be discouraging (Kinne & Eastep, 2008). Assessment may limit learning, because students may confine their work to simply what is being assessed, rather than exploring a topic in depth (Russell et al., 2006). The resulting implication is that while assessment is a necessary ingredient of the learning process, instructors must plan assessment carefully, and construct feedback that will effectively motivate learners.

Promotes Active Learning

Online learning promotes active learning. "Active learning means that rather than students passively receiving information, they are interactively engaged in their learning through activities that foster development of critical thinking" (Dengler, 2008, p. 482). It is characterized by increased participation and improved learning outcomes (Wilson, Pollock, & Hamann, 2007). The research indicated that active learning is advantageous in all learning environments (Dengler, 2008; Jowallah, 2008; Phillips, 2005; Wilson et al., 2007). Active learning engages learners and develops their ability to reflect on their experiences; to construct a deeper and more meaningful understanding of the material (Jowallah, 2008). Active learning also engages students in higher order thinking skills, such as synthesis and evaluation (Phillips, 2005). Active learning motivates students, encourages students to take ownership of their own learning, and supports student achievement (Dengler, 2008). Therefore, active learning is essential to develop in online students.

In light of the importance of active learning, it is valuable to realize how active learning is effectively fostered in the online learning environment. A wide range of rich online formative and summative assessment experiences may elicit active learning; including discussions, role playing, small group work, writing exercises, application assignments, and construction of projects such as the integration of voice and video (Dengler, 2008). Authentic assessment promotes active learning by contextualizing learning and presenting learners with realistic learning opportunities that require problem solving (Vonderwell & Turner, 2005).

Certain learning activities, aside from authentic learning activities, effectively promote active learning across all learning environments (Dengler, 2008). Writing activities and assignments, for example, effectively stimulate active learning in both online and f2f learning environments. Not only do written assignments serve as an assessment tool for instructors, these assignments also contribute to creative thinking, help develop and capitalize on students' interests, and offer students an opportunity to reflect on the material in the context of their learning experience (Dengler, 2008). These benefits of written assignments are important for the development of active learning.

Online discussions also offer students the opportunity to become engaged in the learning process (Dengler, 2008). Although most facilitated discussions conducted online share many similarities to those in a traditional f2f classroom; because all students in the online learning environment are able to participate in all discussions, online discussions provide students with an enhanced opportunity to be actively engaged in the learning process (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Phillips, 2005; Singh & Pan, 2004; Vonderwell & Turner, 2005). Therefore, discussions serve several purposes in online learning; they engage learners, function as a formative assessment tool, and supply summative assessment data, on which grades are based.

Alternatively, other types of activities and assignments may not be as effective at developing active learning across all learning environments. The effectiveness of some pedagogical strategies intended to promote active learning varies depending on the learning platform, that is, whether the strategies are used online or in f2f courses (Singh, & Pan, 2004; Wilson et al., 2007). For example, there are some limitations to online

learning that make implementing instructional strategies, such as role playing, more difficult. Role playing is more easily incorporated into f2f courses than online, since online role playing may be more difficult to facilitate and less effective, due to the largely asynchronous nature of online education.

Assessment in Online Courses

Assessment in higher education serves a wide range of purposes. From directing learning and reinforcing content to evaluation and grading, assessment is essential in higher education, for all delivery platforms, including online learning. Online learning presents instructors, course developers, and other educators with the unique opportunity to develop innovative and evidence based assessment approaches (Russell et al., 2006). Educators in traditional learning environments have often relied on commonly used assessment practices that maintain the status quo with little consideration for the assumptions or theoretical foundations of assessment practices; and irrespective of current research on learning and assessment (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Russell et al., 2006). The advent of online learning has opened the doors for educators to consider assessment from a fresh perspective, which may more effectively inform instruction and course development, and at the same time, evaluate student learning.

Online instructors approach assessment in the context of their personal and professional experiences in addition to their philosophical perspectives (Scagnoli et al., 2009). Some theorists argue that online learning and assessment are a socially constructed activity; wherein participants engage in asynchronous and synchronous discussions, reflection, debate, and a collaborative exchange of ideas and practice

(Russell et al., 2006; Woo & Reeves, 2008). This approach to assessment is focused on collaborative activities, such as discourse in chat rooms, emails, and discussion board postings. Through these classroom activities, instructors assess how well students understand the material, judge how clearly the assignments are developed and written, and determine if the students understand the feedback they receive.

On the other hand, other researchers have argued that a range of assessment activities must be used to inform practice and assess how well students are meeting learning objectives (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007). Activities, such as peer evaluations, discussions, online chats, timed quizzes, project, portfolios, and self assessments may be used to assess learning. Still other educators advocate alternative approaches to assessment approach where test items are adaptive and dependent on previous performance. Adaptive tests assess higher level thinking, by presenting learners with complex, interactive scenarios. Despite these differences in opinions on how to most effectively assess learning, the research indicated that educators believe effective assessment must inform instructors and encourage learning (Challis, 2005; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Russell et al., 2006; Scagnoli et al., 2009; Woo & Reeves, 2008). Assessment is particularly important in the online learning environment where instructors are not able to visually observe students' nonverbal communication, which often signifies the students' level of understanding (Dennen et al., 2007).

Constructivism

For centuries, philosophers, educators, and theorists have been debating how people learn and gain new knowledge. Several scholars and educators have included

constructivist ideas in their writings, including Kant, Dewey, von Glasersfeld, Piaget, and Vygotsky (Phillips, 1995). While the various writers have shared a general understanding that knowledge is constructed rather than transferred from teachers to students, there are important differences to consider. Two of the most well known and implemented forms of constructivism in education are social and cognitive (Phillips, 1995).

Social Constructivism Versus Cognitive Constructivism

Vygotsky and Piaget were both interested in understanding how people construct knowledge (Eun, 2008; Phillips, 1995). It is worth mentioning that neither Vygotsky nor Piaget labeled themselves "constructivists" or used the term "constructivism" in their body of work (Gordon, 2009). Despite this, both espoused constructivist ideology, although the two differed in their presuppositions about how people construct knowledge (Gordon, 2009). Vygotsky held that knowledge construction is a social and cultural experience, immersed in and generated by language, wherein people construct knowledge in the context in which it occurs (Eun, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978). Piaget believed that the construction of knowledge occurs, in various stages of mental thought with limited influence from the social and cultural contexts in which it occurs (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Gordon (2009) argued that a close examination of Piaget's work reveals that Piaget acknowledged the influence of social and cultural impact on learning.

Piaget argued that learning occurs through two processes; assimilation and accommodation (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Through these processes, individuals either bring new knowledge into an existing framework, or schema, of relevant and related

knowledge, or they change their framework to accommodate the new knowledge. Piaget's cognitive model is inherently constructivist, as it presumes that knowledge is created, organized, and interpreted by individuals, on a personal level, through assimilation and accommodation (Powell & Kalina, 2009).

Not all theorists share Piaget's notion of how individuals construct knowledge. Vygotsky and other social constructivists have argued that learning is facilitated with the help of an expert, or instructor (Eun, 2008; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky explained that teachers facilitate learning through scaffolding, where instructors provide support to assist their learners, and gradually reduce the support as the learners demonstrate that they are able to move to the next level. Through peer learning, such as what occurs through group work, learners help each other construct knowledge. A social process, interactions with instructors and peers help the students learn (Eun, 2008; Powell & Kalina, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

Regardless of the differences between cognitive and social constructivism in terms of knowledge construction, there are also shared perspectives on other aspects of learning and education. The perspective on the education process, including assessment is shared by both social and cognitive constructivists; education and assessment is process oriented, rather than product oriented (Powell & Kalina, 2009; Yildirim, 2008). The process of learning is much more important to the overall education of students than the end results, or outcomes. As a result, the instructional and assessment processes are inextricably connected. There are significant implications for assessment, including a heavy emphasis placed on process oriented assessment, such as portfolios and Dynamic

Assessment, as well as formative assessment, as opposed to summative assessment (Yildirim, 2008).

Constructivism and Online Education

According to Legg, Adelman, Mueller, and Levitt (2007), online education is inherently constructivist for several reasons. First, learners must be actively engaged in their own learning process, as opposed to passively receiving information. Learners construct their knowledge through the online learning process. This is valuable, because, as was argued earlier, active learning significantly contributes to positive learning outcomes. Legg et al. cautioned that to implement constructivist approaches in an online learning environment, teachers must shift their instructional style from being teacher directed, where the teacher is responsible for transmitting knowledge to students; to student centered, where the teacher serves as a facilitator of knowledge construction.

The change in perspective from being someone who imparts knowledge to someone who facilitates knowledge construction has been reported to be difficult for many teachers, who had initially taught in the traditional f2f classroom and used traditional instructional approaches, such as lectures, prior to teaching online (Choi & Park, 2006; Johnson, 2008; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009). The shift in perspective is valuable, however, since it creates an opportunity for instructors, or facilitators, to support and help motivate learners, by scaffolding the learning process (Dengler, 2008; Legg et al., 2007). Scaffolding, providing support to learners based on their progress and learning needs; is a central aspect of constructivism in the classroom and should be implemented by online instructors (Legg et al., 2007). The shift in perspective along with the support offered to

learners may contribute to the successes learners experience in the online learning environment.

Several researchers and theorists have offered suggestions for ways to effectively implement constructivist instructional approaches in the online learning setting (Legg et al., 2007; Taber, 2008). According to Legg et al., students need authentic learning experiences, wherein real world problems are addressed through meaningful activities. Active learning opportunities, such as threaded discussions, group projects, and practicum experiences outside the online learning environment, must be constructed so that student become active participants in their own learning. Learners must be given the opportunity for authentic communication in various contexts, including social contexts, such as chat rooms, email discussions, and other asynchronous and synchronous opportunities (Legg et al., 2007). In discussions and other assignments, learners must be expected to consult and source relevant literature. This is essential in the online learning environment; not only for reasons pertaining to academic integrity (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006), but also so that learners develop pathways between research and theoretical bases and their real life experiences (Legg et al., 2007). Finally, discussion is a cornerstone of the constructivist classroom; therefore, discussions must be structured to capitalize on past knowledge, bridging it to new knowledge (Legg et al., 2007).

Constructivism in Teacher Education

There are relevant questions concerning instruction in the online classroom, which pertain to how college instructors and other teachers construct their teaching style,

specifically with regard to learning assessment. For example, how do teachers develop their approach to instructional design, including instruction and assessment practices? Further, what experiences contribute to the assessment approaches online instructors use in teaching undergraduate students? Questions such as these are important to the present study, since the construction of knowledge of instructional design and strategies is valuable to understand. Particularly, because research has shown that the experiences of online instructors, and the social context in which they work, impacts or contributes to online instructors' assessment practices (Eun, 2008; Herrington et al., 2009; Laker, Laker, & Lee., 2008).

Communities of Practice

Communities of practice, which emerge in social, political, and historical contexts, are informal or formal groups of people united by a common thread or shared experience (Wenger, 1999). People may be a part of one or several communities of practice; at work, at home, or in social and political organizations. Some communities of practice meet regularly, while others do not. Through communities of practice, people understand and define their experiences and the meanings of those experiences (Wenger, 1999). Communities of practice exist along several dimensions, including mutual engagement, where people participate or work together to negotiate the meaning of experiences; shared repertoire, which includes shared language, symbols, and artifacts that unite the members of the community of practice; and joint enterprise, which creates a sense of collective negotiation of meaning and mutual accountability (Wenger, 1999, p. 73). Individual members share common experiences, language, tools, and ideas. Further,

those members work together for a common goal and remain accountable to one another. Communities of practice have very specific characteristics (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

One very striking aspect of communities of practice is that they are emergent and inextricable from learning (Wenger, 1999). That is, learning occurs in various communities of practice in a largely unstructured way and that learning is contextualized by the social processes in which it emerges. Individuals work together to develop ideas through a process wherein meaning and importance are negotiated by members of the community of practice. The entire process, applicable to all types of industries, settings, and organizations; enables members to develop personal understandings inclusive of innovative and revised ideas in the context of personal and professional experiences, in addition to formal training (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1999).

Teachers: A Community of Practice

Laker et al. (2008) found that preservice and inservice teachers learn to teach and teach in the context of their social relationships and experiences. They concluded that teaching is a social activity. Support from other educators helps novice instructors by providing them with an awareness of instructional approaches, including effective and ineffective teaching strategies; expertise and advice that help those new instructors understand theory and how it relates to practice; and an opportunity to become socialized into the field. The transition from a novice to an experienced teacher may occur in a similar fashion when an experienced f2f instructor makes the transition to teaching in the online learning environment (Crawley, Fewell, & Sugar, 2009). An undergraduate instructor who has only taught in face-to-face situations may develop procedures for

assessments in an online learning environment, based on the integration of what has worked in the traditional classroom, from in-service trainings and through collaboration with other online instructors. That process may influence the future work of that particular instructor, as well as those colleagues with whom he or she conferred.

Communities of practice are very influential in the development of instructors in the online classroom and their future work. One important concern regarding communities of practice is that preservice and inservice instructors may not be developing approaches that are steeped in research or evidence based (Wenger, 1999). Because of the nature of shared experiences within communities of practice, this type of learning can lead to poor practice (Laker et al., 2008; Wenger, 1999). While communities of practice may be an effective way to learn, it should be pointed out that communities of practice may lead to misinformation or bad habits (Wenger, 1999). So, while communities of practice may be powerful tools for learning, the learning may not always be positive or appropriate.

Constructivism in Higher Education

Despite the research presented concerning the applicability of constructivist principles in higher education, constructivism has not shaped higher education, as one would expect (Gordon, 2009). Gordon contended that despite a large body of writings and the field wide acceptance of constructivism, the literature is largely disjointed and unscholarly. Further, constructivism has been poorly defined; which has led to some fallible assumptions, such as the notion that instructors who implement the constructivist approach do not teach content (Gordon, 2009). This poor definition of constructivism

may explain why constructivist instructional approaches vary tremendously and may appear extremely dissimilar in different classrooms.

In addition to the poorly defined constructivist theory, Gordon (2009) believed that teachers do not have the research abilities to significantly contribute to the present body of empirical knowledge and educational theory on constructivism. According to Gordon, there is somewhat of a field wide assumption that teachers should focus on teaching and not spend time developing or furthering educational theory. This may be due to a lack of theoretical understanding on the part of teachers. The implication is that teacher preparatory programs do not adequately prepare teachers to implement constructivist approaches in their classroom.

Cohen (1988) posited that the constructivist approach is much more demanding and work intensive, when compared with other approaches. In online learning, this is a significant consideration, as instructors have commented that online instruction and assessment is more time consuming than teaching in f2f courses. Gordon (2009) explained that new teachers, in particular, are so inundated with classroom management and assimilating into the role of an instructor that taking on larger and more in depth responsibilities is too much.

Finally, along with the increased work load and a poorly defined understanding of constructivism, school culture may be prohibitive to constructivist teaching methods (Gordon, 2009). That is, the current trend in education emphasizes accountability. As a result, teachers are discouraged from using the constructivist approach to teaching, which places little to no emphasis on formative assessments, which are process oriented (Black

& William, 1998; Wiliam et al., 2004). For these plausible reasons, constructivism has not sculpted education in any notable way.

Assessment Theory in College Classrooms

Assessment theory for college classrooms is a general theory where Brookhart (2005) outlined various aspects of assessment of learning. Assessment theory defines assessment as measures taken to construct an understanding regarding student learning, for some educational purpose (Brookhart, 2005). Instructors must have knowledge concerning assessment approaches, a well developed understanding of how to choose and construct classroom assessment, be able to recognize how to obtain accurate and valuable information on the status of their learners, realize how to interpret the data collected through the process of assessment, and be able to teach with the assessment process in mind. This assessment cycle is dynamic (Brookhart, 2005). Instructors plan assessments and use the results to offer students some type of feedback; make instructional choices; assign grades; and to advise students concerning additional courses or career paths.

There are other important premises of assessment theory in college classrooms. According to Brookhart (2005), there are several types of assessments, including paper and pencil assessments, performance assessments, communication assessments, and portfolios; when conducted appropriately, assessment includes quantitative and qualitative information. In addition, feedback includes information provided to students, on the basis of formative and summative assessment (Alquraan, Bsharah, & Al-Bustanji, 2010). Feedback includes objective scoring, which is generated when questions on assessments have right and wrong answers. Feedback may be based on subjective

scoring, which requires some judgments. Finally, written feedback is commentary offered to students in narrative form, such as the track change column comments (Wosley, 2008).

Assessment theory for the college classroom includes provisions for grades, scoring, and scales (Brookhart, 2005). Brookhart explained that rubrics are used to communicate to the students the standards and how grading is based on those standards. Rubrics can be analytic or holistic. Analytic rubrics contain details and offer the students information about their writing as well as the content; whereas holistic rubrics show the students general grading criteria (Kan, 2007). Further, rubrics may be task specific or general. Task specific rubrics are not shared with students, as these contain test items; they are used to guide instruction and help instructors score assessments in various forms (Brookhart, 2005).

Brookhart (2005) also theorized that assessments must be evaluated in terms of validity, reliability, usefulness, fairness, and the appropriateness of the scales used. According to Brookhart, a series of issues must be considered when evaluating assessments. The areas of interest include what information the assessment needs to generate, the best way to collect that information, if the assessments measure what they say they will, and if the assessments offer enough information to reliably draw conclusions concerning students' learning.

Related Theory

Biggs' (1996) constructive alignment is a student centered approach to teaching, wherein the ideas of constructivism are integrated with the instructional design approach

of instructional alignment. To apply constructive alignment, instructors develop and clearly communicate learning objectives; students construct their learning in ways that will enable them to meet the objectives; and assessment substantiates that the students are learning and developing the skills outlined in the objectives.

Instructional Alignment

Instructional alignment provides a link between instruction and assessment, to improve learner outcomes (Biggs, 1996; Cohen, 1987). For example, if students are expected to be able to explain the connection between goal attainment and depression, then instruction must address the connection between goal attainment and depression, further, on the learning assessment, students must be expected to explain the connection between goal attainment and depression. The research indicated that highly aligned instruction and assessment leads to significant learning gains (Cohen, 1987). For this reason, instructional alignment is essential in higher education (Reeves, 2006). According to Reeves (2006), instructors must examine objectives, content, instructional design, learner tasks, instructor roles, student roles, technological resources, and assessment. To effectively align all components, it is essential that instructors and course designers consider these components, as they exist on a continuum.

According to Reeves (2006), objectives are measurable outcomes, ranging from lower level to higher level thinking skills. Content extends from structured, offered in texts and published materials, to unstructured content, for example, historical documents or experimental data. Instructional design varies from direct instruction, such as lectures, to problem based learning. Instructor roles range from a traditional approach focused on

teaching to a more student centered approach, focused on learning. In addition, Reeves (2006) argued that learner tasks range from traditional activities, including lectures and written assignments to authentic assessments, such as service learning. Students vary from passive receivers of instruction to being actively engaged in construction of knowledge. Technology contrasts from stagnant and prepackaged to current and relevant to real world applications. Assessment ranges from a heavy reliance on a few, traditional methods that measure lower level thinking; to authentic and comprehensive assessments that assess higher level thinking skills. According to the tenants of instructional alignment, each of the eight elements will need to be aligned with all the others to maximize students' learning (Biggs, 1996; Reeves, 2006).

Biggs' Inclusion of Social Constructivism

Biggs (1996) explained that social constructivism is student centered and has roots in cognitive psychology. He argued that the learning process is beyond a simple transference from teacher to student. "Learners arrive at meaning by actively selecting, and cumulatively constructing, their own knowledge, through both individual and social activity" (Biggs, 1996, p. 348). The construction of knowledge involves several participants; the teacher, the students' peers, and the student. The teacher is responsible for formal teaching activities, such as lectures, labs, and field trips. Peers partake in informal collaboration outside the classroom, for example, some times students form study groups. And, students, themselves, engage in independent learning, through studying, taking notes, and the use of metacognitive strategies. According to constructivism, the social interactions provide the context for learning.

Constructive Alignment

The theory of constructive alignment addressed how to achieve the goal of reaching higher level thinking. According to Biggs (1996), this goal is accomplished by aligning the assessment practices with instructional design. Assessment is a particularly important component to the learning process, since students tend to configure their learning in a way that will make them most successful on the assessments and in the course. Therefore alignment between assessment and content is extremely critical. Intuitively, constructive alignment makes sense. That is, if teachers provide instruction on one topic and assess something different, students will not be successful and may feel frustrated, which may discourage them from assuming responsibility for their learning or becoming actively engaged in their learning. Conversely, when instructors develop intended learning outcomes, use a wide variety of instructional approaches, and then assess the knowledge and skills that were taught; then learners will be more actively engaged, and self regulated (Biggs, 1996).

According to the theory of Constructive Alignment, one essential goal for teachers is that their students reach higher level thinking skills as a result of the learning process, which is contextualized by the social construction of knowledge (Biggs, 1996). Biggs realized that this goal is weakened by the standards and limits of learning that teachers set, and how they define success; teachers may limit learning by focusing discussions and lectures so narrowly that students' learning is limited to only the content of those discussions or lectures. Biggs concluded that teachers must include a variety teaching and learning activities that incorporates all participants. Also, the spontaneous

learning that results from peer interactions is essential to the construction of knowledge and development of self regulated learners.

There is some concern among members of the higher education community that constructive alignment leads to surface learning, rather than the deep learning the theory espoused to promote (Biggs, 1996; Jervis & Jervis, 2005). According to Norton (2004), the problem with constructive alignment is that students may restrict their learning to only the established learning outcomes. Jervis and Jervis (2005) labeled alignment "the death of originality and serendipity" (¶ 20), since outcomes are clearly mapped out and structured, which encourages students to limit their learning to expected outcomes. The implication is that students may be missing the impromptu learning opportunities that may present themselves in the course as a result of various learning interactions, such as what may occur in an online discussion board.

Emergent Themes From Literature on Assessment in Online Learning

Research on online learning has been conducted to understand issues surrounding learning assessments in distance learning (Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, & Cooper, 2006). Matters related to quality; technology; testing, assessment, and evaluation are the predominant themes present in research on learning assessment in online learning.

Quality

Quality is an important issue in literature on online learning. "Quality of instruction is understood, in today's paradigm, to be that which results in student learning" (Kinne & Eastep, 2008, p.46). Effective online instruction must promote critical thinking, communicate clear expectations, and develop a sense of community.

According to Kinne and Eastep, the structure of the course must include readings, discussions, instructive activities, and assignments; all of which promote learning. Because discussions, activities, and assignments offer instructors and students formative and summative assessment data that may be used to focus and promote learning (Challis, 2005; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Russell et al., 2006; Scagnoli et al., 2009; Woo & Reeves, 2008); it is important those course components are of a high quality.

There is an abundance of literature debating the quality of online courses and comparing online courses to f2f courses (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Donavant, 2009; Li & Irby, 2008; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009; Smith & Mitry, 2008; Ulmer et al., 2007; Wyatt, 2005). Critics of online education argue that the operating cost of online courses is higher than f2f courses. To counter the increased cost of operation, large online universities remain profitable by using less qualified and less expensive instructors (Smith & Mitry, 2008). Smith and Mitry (2008) reasoned that there is a significant quality difference between instructors with a master's degree and doctoral student teaching assistants. The quality of online education is linked to the instructors' experiences, therefore, when universities utilize less qualified instructors, the quality of the classes is lower (Lao & Gonzales, 2005).

Advocates of online education argue that the quality of online learning is comparable or surpasses the quality of f2f courses. Some proponents of online learning contend that the lived professional experience of instructors working in their field all over the world is a valuable contribution for learners (Li & Akins, 2005; Li & Irby, 2008;

Singh & Pan, 2004). Instructors are able to fairly and equitably treat all students, which may improve the quality of the students' experiences (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005).

Students have reported that they believe online learning offers high quality education that is more academically challenging than traditional educational experiences (Wyatt, 2005). When surveyed, nearly 60% of the students rated online learning as being more demanding than f2f courses, and 36% rated online learning as being equally as demanding as traditional courses (Wyatt, 2005). According to Wyatt:

> Online students believe they are receiving a quality education online. One student wrote: *I completely enjoy online courses, not only because of the convenience, but also because of the quality of instruction. I have gotten as much (if not more) knowledge from these courses.* (p. 466)

Despite the wealth of research comparing and contrasting the quality of online versus f2f classes and instructors, no conclusive findings have established the quality of one learning setting over the other. There is some evidence that the instructors' perception of online learning and experiences teaching online impacts their judgment concerning the quality and usefulness of online education (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Choi & Park, 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009; Ulmer et al., 2007). The body of research has been limited by the research methodology used. Some arguments are based on personal experiences and opinions (Boerema et al., 2007; Donavant, 2009; Smith & Mitry, 2008); while other arguments are based on literature reviews, rather than empirical evidence (Li & Irby, 2008; Singh & Pan, 2004; Woo & Reeves, 2008). As a result, researchers may have drawn conclusions that may be invalid or unreliable (Creswell, 2003, 2007). The

implication is that additional research is needed for educators and researchers so they may draw sound conclusions and make research based recommendations for ways to improve the quality of online education, specifically in areas related to assessment.

Technological Demands

Issues of technology needs and support are important to understand in the context of online education. Online education presents instructors and students with unique technology challenges (Crowley, Fewell, & Sugar, 2009). High quality online classes and programs are marked by premium and cutting edge technology, therefore, students and instructors must be capable of using such technology to participate in online education (Smith & Mitry, 2008).

According to Kimber and Wyatt-Smith (2009), to effectively learn online, students must have a well developed critical and applied use of technology, beyond being simply internet savvy. Li and Akins (2005) argued that this is a commonly held misconception about teaching online; while some technological ability is necessary to teach, assess, and learn online, generally, the skill level required is not very high and the vast majority of colleges and universities offer training and support to their online instructors and students. This is important because research indicated that training is essential for online instructors (Li & Irby, 2008; Wiliam et al., 2004)

Research also indicated that instructors share several concerns regarding technology and teaching online (Fish & Gill, 2009). One concern shared by a number of instructors is their technological readiness to teach online (Fish & Gill, 2009). Though the skill level needed to teach online might not be extremely high, the training and

practice necessary to effectively facilitate an online course is time intensive (Choi & Park, 2006; Johnson, 2008). Some instructors have maintained that teaching online is very time consuming, and the added time that was spent to learn the new technology made teaching online less appealing (Choi & Park, 2006; Johnson, 2008).

There are also benefits of the technological resources available in online learning, in terms of assessment. Technology advances may make some aspects of assessment less time consuming for instructors, such as the management of assessments and grades. Computer assisted instructional design offers instructors alternative assessment practices, such as automated graded quizzes, which offer students immediate feedback concerning their progress (van Gog, Sluijsmans, Joosten-ten Brinke, & Prins, 2010).

Testing, Assessment, and Evaluation

Testing, assessment, and evaluation are a critical aspect of teaching and learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Wiliam et al., 2004). One overriding concern regarding assessment of online students was academic honesty. Online and f2f instructors expressed a fear that online students are more likely to cheat than students enrolled in f2f courses (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006). The concern that instructors and administrators share is that since students are not closely monitored and due to the lack of personal contact, online students may be more likely to cheat on quizzes and exams or plagiarize the work of others (Grijalva et al., 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009). Evidence suggested that online students are not more likely to cheat (Grijalva et al., 2006). Further, the online learning environment may not be as conducive to cheating, simply because of the geographical distance among learners. Members of the online

learning environment are located all over the world. Even those individuals who live relatively closely to other students may not ever come in contact with those learning partners, which may inhibit students' opportunities to cheat on tests or share written assignments.

In addition to issues concerning academic honesty and assurance, managing assessments creates another issue, which is time constriction. While there are many tools available for instructors to assess learning and construct feedback, such as asynchronous discussions and application assignments, offering students prompt and detailed feedback based on assessment results is time consuming (Boerema et al., 2007). Research indicated that instructors believe teaching online requires a significant amount of time, in comparison to f2f courses (Choi & Park, 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009; Johnson, 2008; see also Lao & Gonzales, 2005). The time commitment necessary to effectively assess learning and offer students feedback about how well they have met learning goals and objectives is a concern for many online instructors, or for those contemplating teaching online.

Literature Related to Methodology

The literature review for the present study has revealed a large body of literature related to online learning and assessment practices of online instructors. Several research designs from the qualitative tradition were used to understand aspects of assessment in online learning. Mixed methods design, which incorporates quantitative approaches with qualitative approaches (Creswell, 2003), has been used to understand online learning and assessment in higher education delivered online. For example, Arend (2007) used a

mixed methods approach to understand the relationship between assessment process and student learning strategies in online courses. Methods used included questionnaires, with open ended questions, and surveys for both students and instructors. One important finding of Arend's work for the present study is that instructors had a dim view of how well students incorporate feedback into their future work. In addition to Arend's (2007) work, other studies used mixed methods to understand the perceptions of online instructors.

Fish and Gill (2009) surveyed 87 faculty members to gather the instructors' perceptions of online instruction and collected qualitative data through open ended questions. Findings included instructors, who were uncomfortable teaching online felt unprepared or under prepared to teach online. While mixed methods approaches, such as the ones highlighted have been used, a large amount of qualitative research has been used to investigate online learning and assessment in online learning.

Case studies have been conducted to collect rich descriptions of online learning as well as assessment in online education (Choi & Park, 2006; Kanuka et al., 2007; Scagnoli et al., 2009; Vonderwell et al., 2007). Vonderwell et al. conducted a case study in which the researchers examined transcripts of online discussions; used online observations of the discussion board; and surveyed the students with open ended questions. The researchers looked at criteria used to assess discussions, participant involvement, and issues that emerged over time. Also, Kanuka et al. evaluated instructional methods to see how well different methods helped motivate students to achieve a deep understanding of the material in an online learning environment, though a case study. Case studies are

valuable for researchers who are studying assessment in online learning, because they provide those researchers a very detailed look at online learning from the perspective of those interested parties (Creswell, 2003; 2007).

Other meritorious qualitative research approaches have been used in addition to case studies. Phenomenology has also been used to investigate instruction in online learning (Johnson, 2008; Lao & Gonzales, 2005). Lao and Gonzales conducted a phenomenological study to understand the perceptions of professors and graduate students concerning their experiences in an online learning environment. Lao and Gonzales found that instructor perceptions and instructor technological readiness impacted their opinions and interest in teaching online, as well as how they experienced online teaching. Collectively, quantitative, mixed methods, and qualitative research approaches have effectively begun the conversation on online learning and assessment practices in online education.

Aside from mixed methods, and qualitative research; perhaps the largest body of research on assessment in online learning is based on literature reviews and reflective commentary (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Johnson, 2008; Kimber & Wyatt-Smith, 2009; Kinne & Eastep, 2008; Li & Akins, 2005; Li & Irby, 2007; Singh & Pan, 2004; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, & Cooper, 2006; Woo & Reeves, 2008). These studies, which have emerged from the literature and reflective discussions on online learning and assessment in online learning, are important in the larger discussion on online learning. The provide reflection and synthesis for the body of literature on online learning, teaching in the online learning environment, and assessment practices of online instructors.

Summary

The present literature review has demonstrated that there is a broad array of literature on online learning and assessment in online learning. Largely, the literature specific to online learning is general and does not specifically relate to instructor experiences regarding assessment in online learning. Where some research has been conducted to understand the experiences of online instructors with regard to assessment, that research looked at very specific assessment procedures used in online education, such as asynchronous discussion or the use of weekly automated quizzes; rather than instructor experiences regarding general assessment practices, as well as the benefits and challenges of assessment in the online learning environment (Klecker, 2007). As a result, the present study explored the experience of online instructors of undergraduate social sciences courses regarding their assessment practices, including the challenges and benefits, in the online learning environment. Chapter 3 explains and rationalizes the research methodology for the present study. The phenomenological research design is discussed in depth as well as other qualitative research designs.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The present study depicts the experiences of online undergraduate instructors' assessment practices in social science classes and addresses the challenges and benefits of assessment practices in the online learning environment. There is a gap in the literature concerning instructor experiences with learning assessments in online education. The purpose of the qualitative approach to research, specifically phenomenology, is to obtain vivid descriptions of the lived experiences of individuals (Creswell, 2007); therefore, the phenomenological research approach is ideally suited to obtain descriptions of the experiences of online instructors and the use of assessment techniques.

The purpose of this chapter is to communicate the methodology that was used for the present study. In chapter 3, the design is rationalized and several aspects of phenomenology are explored. The role of the researcher, the criteria required of participants, and the ethical protection of the participants are explained. The data collection process and storage are outlined, and the data analysis process and coding procedures are described.

Research Design

There are two primary approaches to research: quantitative and qualitative. These approaches can be used individually and stand alone or they can be used together in a mixed methods approach to discover answers to research questions (Creswell, 2003). Quantitative research methods include closed ended questions through tests, controlled experiments, and questionnaires (Creswell, 2003). The benefit of quantitative research is

that a large number of individuals can be surveyed and the results are quantifiable; however, quantitative research does not depict the human experience. For this reason, the quantitative approach was not appropriate for the phenomenon under consideration.

The present study used qualitative research methodology. Creswell (2007) explained that when groundwork has not been established for a particular topic, it is appropriate to design and implement qualitative research. In addition, a qualitative research approach is appropriate in subject matters where there is no clear research establishing why a phenomenon occurs, and clarification is needed. Finally, broad research questions can be examined with qualitative research methodology (Creswell, 2007).

Creswell (2007) explained that there are five primary qualitative traditions. These traditions are narrative, case study, grounded theory, ethnography, and phenomenology. These traditions are used to describe and understand the lived experiences of people through rich and detailed descriptions. All the qualitative research traditions require attention to detail and are time intensive. Qualitative research requires a commitment to revealing information relevant to the research questions, which may differ for each tradition.

There are important differences that distinguish the five traditions, which in part determine what tradition is used for specific research questions and topics (Creswell, 2007). The differences inform researchers regarding the tradition that may be most appropriate for their research question or questions. Narrative, case study, grounded theory, and ethnography are useful qualitative research designs; however, they are not the

most appropriate approach to research the question in the present study. The present study is designed to uncover the experience of online undergraduate instructors regarding assessment practices in undergraduate social science classes.

Narratives offer researchers an in depth view of an individual (Creswell, 2007). The written report details the participants' stories, which are retold in a chronological narrative. Narratives are a collaborative effort between researchers and their participants. The narrative process includes open ended interviews with a small number of participants. Other data collection techniques include archived materials, participant journaling, observations, and casual conversations. The narrative approach was not appropriate in the present study because the mission was not to understand the life experiences of one or two individuals. The goal was to ascertain the perspective of many instructors because of the personal and context-rich nature of teacher development.

Case studies closely examine one or a few cases, and are helpful in understanding one particular case, at a particular point in time, and for a specific length of time (Creswell, 2007). Case studies may also be used to compare and contrast several cases or to illustrate a holistic view of participants and their experiences. According to Creswell (2007), case studies may bolster what is known on a topic or clarify a complex issue that was not well understood. Although the present study may have benefited from the case study approach, the goal of the research was to understand the experiences of many instructors. A larger number of participants are needed to effectively study the experiences of online instructors. There may be countless approaches to assessing online learning because teaching approaches are developed in the context of personal and

professional experiences: as a result, the case study was not the most effective way to understand the experiences of undergraduate social science instructors who teach online, regarding learning assessments.

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach where researchers immerse themselves in the data to construct or discover a theory (Creswell, 2007). Through the research process, the researcher develops an explanation of experience of many participants. The goal of the present study was to understand and describe the experiences of online instructors regarding assessment practices. As a result, grounded theory was not the most appropriate approach to use.

Ethnographies allow researchers to understanding the experiences of individuals as they live in context of their cultural and social environments (Creswell, 2007). Ethnographic research is often conducted through field observations. The present study was designed to realize the lived experiences of online instructors in the context of their teaching experiences and development through in depth interviews; therefore ethnography was not the most appropriate approach with which to explore the phenomenon (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

Phenomenology is a qualitative approach to research through which the lived experiences of individuals are understood in the context of the phenomenon (Vivilaki, 2008). Moustakas (1994) argued that phenomenology involves two aspects: the individual's experiences in the context of the phenomena and the contexts that influence the individual's experiences of the phenomena. In phenomenology, individuals' experiences are understood in the context of the phenomenon (Vivilaki, 2008).

Phenomenology is reflective, descriptive, and subjective (Creswell, 2007; Moustakes, 1994). The researcher must be immersed in the experience and gather the information from participants without bias or judgment (Moustakas, 1994). The experience of conducting a phenomenological study serves as a gateway to both develop interest in a phenomenon and further inquiry and study for the researcher. Phenomenology is an appropriate approach to take when the researcher is interested in understanding a phenomenon in order to develop practices or policies (Creswell, 2007). In phenomenology, several data collection approaches are used including in depth interviews, document reviews, observations, and art (Creswell, 2007). The present study included extensive interviews, as well as document reviews of syllabi. Important information concerning online assessments was uncovered by using these approaches to data collection. Phenomenology was the most appropriate approach to understand the experiences of online instructors regarding their learning assessment practices in undergraduate social science courses. As a result, the present study was conducted in the phenomenological tradition.

Phenomenological Process

There are several important processes that are central to the phenomenological approach to research epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Through these processes, the researcher was able to understand the phenomenon under consideration with an unbiased and fresh perspective.

According to Moustakas (1994), the epoche process involves the identification and bracketing of personal biases, preconceptions, and prejudgments about all aspects of

the topic. The epoche process enables the researcher to understand the participants' experiences with focus, clarity of thought, and through a new perspective, in much the same way a person who has no previous experiences and prejudices may. The unbiased and impartial perspective will emerge as a result of examining what is actually observed, rather than what may be expected, based on past experiences and biases (Moustakas, 1994). The process of epoche is a personal experience, which will leave the researcher receptive to the participants' experiences. Moustakas argued that the process requires reflection.

In the context of the epoche process, through the phenomenological reduction, the participants' experiences were captured in rich, textured words, without assigning any meaning or judgment to what was said (Moustakas, 1994). The resulting description conveys the essence of the experiences being explored. The process of phenomenological reduction is detailed and long; the data, contained on the interview transcripts, must be repeatedly reviewed to examine the phenomenon from all angles and at all levels (Moustakas, 1994, p. 94). As researchers progress through the reduction process, their ideas and thinking may need to be refined, clarified, and revised through reflection. It is through this iterative process that researchers are able to fully understand the phenomenon and assign meaning to the participants' experiences.

In addition to this reflective process during phenomenological reduction, there is another aspect of reduction, horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994). Horizons are the essential ingredients of a phenomenon, contained and identified in the participants' statements regarding the phenomenon. In horizonalization, the interview transcripts are

read and every statement is weighted the same, that is, there is no judgment or value placed on some statements, but not others. As redundant, irrelevant, or meaningless statements become apparent, then those statements are removed with the rich ideas and components of the phenomenon remaining (Moustakas, 1994).

Possible themes begin to emerge once the rich description is developed through the process of phenomenological reduction. Possible meanings and contexts that serve as the structure of the phenomenon being studied emerge as the textural descriptions are considered. According to Moustakas (1994), there are a countless number of possible themes and meanings researchers can derive from the textural descriptions that emerge as a result of the reduction process. Researchers identify examples that are representative of the themes and contexts that help to explain the phenomenon. Through the phenomenological process, researchers set aside their own experiences and biases; richly describe the experiences of the participants, called coresearchers by Moustakas (1994); delineate possible themes and structures of the phenomenon, and finally synthesize the meaning and essences with the textured descriptions, all of which is representative of the essence of the participants' specific experiences with the phenomenon in a specified time and context.

Role of the Researcher

Unlike the impartial role of researchers in quantitative research, individuals conducting qualitative studies engage in a dialogue with the participants (Creswell, 2007). For the present study, the data were collected by engaging in in-depth interviews with all the participants to gather a rich understanding of the phenomenon of assessment

in online instruction. In this study, I collected and coded the data, and wrote the report. All data was manually analyzed in the traditional manner Moustakas (1994) prescribed. The participants were identified from various sources, including through personal relationships as well as previous institutions where I attended college online.

Qualitative researchers' perspectives are developed in the context of their professional, educational, and personal experiences. Researchers' biases and personal investment in the topic are considered in the context of those perspectives and experiences. Therefore, the epoche process for the present study was particularly important, because I have been an online student for 5 years. I have been exposed to a wide variety of assessment approaches, as an online student, and I have developed opinions concerning specific assessment practices. It was essential, then, that all potential biases and ideas that influenced data interpretation be identified.

Question and Subquestion

The following questions were used to guide the present study:

1. What is the experience of online undergraduate instructors regarding assessment practices in social sciences classes?
2. How do online instructors describe the challenges and benefits of assessment practices?

Ethical Considerations

Several measures were taken to ensure the ethical treatment of the participants. Participants were encouraged to ask questions or address concerns at any time during the study; they were informed that they may leave the study at any time, for any reason. All

participants' identities remained anonymous, and their answers remained confidential in all forms of communication. A coding process was used to protect the identities of the participants (i.e., P1, P2, P3, etc.) in all transcripts and written work. The universities from which the participants hailed were not identified, last names and personal information was not used, and participants were not required to share information that may compromise their professional positions or their personal or professional well being. All participants were treated with respect and courtesy. I developed a positive working relationship with each person by listening to their experiences without judgment and communicating clearly and effectively. I listened to the experiences of the participants without judgment communicating clearly and effectively with the participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

Informed Consent

To participate, individuals were required to sign a document of informed consent (Appendix A). The informed consent document included background information on the study, the voluntary nature of the study, the risks and benefits associated with participation, provisions for compensation and confidentiality, and my contact information. The consent forms were stored in a fireproof lockbox in my home.

Institutional Review Board

In conjunction with the Walden University guidelines for research and the dissertation process, an application was submitted to Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Ethical Standards in Research. The IRB process was intended to ensure that the researcher complied with all ethical standards of Walden University and

the U.S. federal regulations. The application included specific details regarding the research as well as ethical consideration and protection that were afforded the participants. Permission was granted before I proceeded with the research.

Participants

Moustakas (1994) explained that there are particular characteristics participants must share to be considered for inclusion in a phenomenological study. Participants must have experienced the phenomenon personally; they must voluntarily agree to lengthy, recorded interviews and possibly follow-up interviews or meetings; they must have an interest in understanding the phenomenon so they will invest themselves completely in the process; and they must be willing to have their story told in published form, which for the present study is a dissertation.

There were other, study-specific criteria for participation in the present study. Instructors must have taught in an online learning environment for at least one year. The participants have constructed the course for which they shared their experiences. Course construction was completed by the instructors either alone or with a group of curriculum specialists, colleagues, or cooperating instructors. The participants were also responsible for the learning assessments conducted in the course, although no specific criteria were outlined for the exact assessment process or tools used. Instructors who facilitate courses that were designed and developed by curriculum committees or curriculum specialists were not included in the present study. Only instructors with a master's degree or a terminal degree were included as participants. Teachers who have not taught in f2f classes were included when the other criteria were met.

In depth interviews were used as the primary source of data for the present study, which is typical of phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Starks and Trinidad (2007) explained that "the concept or the experience under study is the unit of analysis; given that an individual person can generate hundreds or thousands of concepts, large samples are not necessarily needed to generate rich data sets" (p. 1374). According to Sandelowski (1995), an appropriate sample size is one that is not too large, but sufficient to offer "case-oriented analysis" (p. 183), and not too small, so that it offers a new rich description and understanding of the phenomenon. In this study, a sample of 15 was used and provided sufficient description to reach saturation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sample size enabled the researcher to include typical and atypical cases and achieve variation in the data, which was essential to completely understanding the phenomenon.

Purposeful sampling was used to solicit participants for this study. In purposeful sampling, researchers specifically recruit participants who have experienced or are knowledgeable about the phenomenon (Coyne, 1997; Creswell, 2007). Participants who met the criteria to participate were gathered through my contacts. As an online student, and a student with colleagues who teach online social sciences courses, I have access to instructors who may participate and refer the research project to their colleagues. Online instructors from the University of Maryland University College, Walden University, and Northeastern University Professional College who teach social science courses at the undergraduate level were invited to participate. When those lists of contacts were exhausted I utilized snowball or chain sampling, in which participants were asked to refer their colleagues to the study (Creswell, 2007).

Data Collection

In depth, semistructured interviews were conducted for the present study. A list of guiding questions that I developed was used in the interviews (see Appendix B). Rubin and Rubin (2005) explained that "through qualitative interviews, you can understand experiences and reconstruct events in which you did not participate" (p. 3). In the present study, the in depth interviews offered the participants the opportunity to provide examples of their assessment processes; explain their assessment approaches, including any reasoning for their choices; and consider the benefits and challenges of assessment in online instruction.

The interviews were conducted over the phone or in person at the participants' convenience and took between 45 minutes and about one hour. The interviews were digitally recorded with the participants' permission. Because of the distant nature of online learning, instructors lived all over the United States. Some participants' locations made in person interviews prohibitive; therefore, interviews were conducted over the phone and, when possible, in person. Participants decided if they preferred an in person interview or a phone interview. In all cases the participants' wishes were respected. The interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

I have stored the data, transcriptions, and working draft of the written report on a fireproof and waterproof external hard drive. Additionally, a thumb drive was used to store the same data. The thumb drive was put in a locked firebox. Finally, a working draft of the written report was stored on the researcher's personal computer. The researcher's computer is password protected. Through the process, I have stored a

working draft of the dissertation, as well as the transcribed data. The data will be stored for a period of 5 years from completion of the study. The data will be destroyed after that period of time.

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) presented two modified approaches to data analysis in phenomenological studies, including van Kaam's method of analysis and the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of data analysis. The data for the present study was manually analyzed using Moustakas' modification of van Kaam's method. In all phenomenological studies, researchers bracket their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This is particularly important because I am an experienced online learner, and have taught for many years in a traditional learning environment. I have taken curriculum courses in teaching psychology online, in my current program at Walden University, which may have colored how the data was analyzed and the phenomenon described. As a result, it was essential that I bracketed my experiences, in an effort to clearly, and impartially analyze the data. The data analysis was conducted once the bracketing process was completed. All analysis was done manually, without the use of any computer software programs, such as Word or Atlas-ti.

Moustakas' (1994) modified version of van Kaam's method includes seven specific steps:

1. The statements that are relevant to the participants' experiences were recorded.

2. The statements were evaluated to be sure they were representative of the experience. Statements that were able to be selected and labeled were considered

horizons of the experience, or units of meaning. All repetitive and overlapping phrases were eliminated. Ambiguous statements were clarified through more precise description.

3. The invariant constituents were grouped together and labeled into themes.

4. The invariant constituents were validated; the constituents were compared with the original interview transcripts and those constituents that were not reflective or relevant to the participants' experiences were eliminated.

5. I constructed a complete description with textural descriptions of the meaning and essence of the experience for each participant. Direct quotes from the interviews were used to support the descriptions.

6. With the individual textural description, an individual structural description was written for each participant.

7. An integrated textural-structural description was constructed that richly described the essence of the participants' experiences. A complete description, which represented a synthesized meaning of the experience for the entire group of participants, was constructed.

Discrepant cases emerged in the course of the data analysis. In the interest of understanding the phenomenon of assessment in online instruction, discrepant cases were noted, analyzed, and compared with the remaining data and included in the final study.

Reliability and Validity

In quantitative research, reliability refers to how consistently and accurately the findings represent the results and validity refers to how well the tools and measurements used measure what they intend to (Creswell, 2003). In qualitative research, "Reliability

and validity are conceptualized as trustworthiness, rigor and quality in qualitative paradigm" (Golafshani, 2003, p. 604). To achieve trustworthiness, I maintained an audit trail and utilized member checking (Creswell, 2007).

Audit Trail

Audit trails are records that are kept throughout the research process, in which the researcher maintains dense description of the research methodology and any relevant reactions (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). An audit trail was used to bolster the dependability and confirmability of the present study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail for the present study consisted of researcher journal entries that included rich description of the methodology used in the study, as well as reactions and thoughts about the data, themes, and descriptions contained in the data. In the audit trail, the researcher considered how her construction of meanings, experiences, and thoughts influenced how she interpreted the data.

Member Checking

The present study included member checking, which helped to ensure credibility. Phenomenological studies are designed and implemented to understand the participants' experiences with the phenomenon under consideration. The present study communicated the experiences of online, undergraduate instructors regarding their assessment practices. Interpretations of the data were presented to the participants and the instructors were asked to provide feedback concerning how well the description of the instructors' experiences of assessment in online learning environment reflected the actual experiences

of the participants. Participants were asked to extend, correct, elaborate, and argue the findings (Creswell, 2007; Curtin & Fossey, 2007).

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of psychology instructors who teach online regarding assessments that are used to evaluate leaning outcomes in an online learning environment. To accomplish this, a phenomenological study was conducted. I conducted between 15 and 20 open ended interviews, recorded, and analyzed the data. A rich description of the phenomenon resulted Several measures were taken to strengthen the quality of the study, including maintaining an audit trail, member checking, thick description, and quality data collection procedures. The findings of the study are presented in chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of social science instructors who teach online regarding assessment practices that are used to evaluate leaning outcomes. This chapter presents the data analysis that resulted from interviews with undergraduate instructors who teach online. Steps undertaken to collect data, participant profiles, data management and analysis, and evidence of quality are presented. The analysis revealed three major themes and four subthemes. Samples of the verbatim responses are offered to illuminate the themes and subthemes.

Data Collection

Interviews

For this study, 15 semistructured interviews were conducted via the phone and in person over a period of 2 months. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 75 minutes, depending on the instructors' responses, speech cadence, and time schedule. Some instructors preferred to meet over the phone, and that request was accommodated. The interviews were digitally recorded and kept in three places: a password protected laptop computer; fireproof external hard drive stored in a locked closet; and memory stick and CD, which were stored in a locked fireproof and waterproof safe. Throughout the process, I was the only one who had access to the data and all working files and drafts associated with the research project.

Interview Questions

The study was designed to increase understanding regarding online instructors' experiences with assessment. The primary research question was: What is the experience

of online undergraduate instructors regarding assessment practices in undergraduate social science classes? A secondary question addressed the perceived challenges and benefits of assessment practices in the online learning environment. The interview questions were written with the research questions in mind (Appendix B). After the first interview, two interview questions were added. Question 12 was added to understand the instructors' thoughts about their own assessment practices, including how the instructors view assessments from nontraditional approaches. This additional question was added because the first instructor who was interviewed shared his knowledge of nontraditional assessment methods, which seemed important in the online learning environment, which is a nontraditional learning environment. Question 13 was added to understand how student evaluations and feedback may influence the instructors' approach to assessment, and uncover the instructors' willingness to make changes based on their students' feedback. The first instructor spoke at length about the impact student feedback has had on his assessment practices, which indicated that student feedback may be a pivotal component of the development of online assessment practices for online instructors.

After the third interview, Question 14 was added to understand how instructors approach learning how to teach online. Through conversation with the first two instructors, it was clear that there was value to understanding how instructors learned to teach in the online learning environment. Prior to beginning any additional interviews, I formally added the last interview question to the list of questions. In effect, all the instructors addressed all the questions, despite these three additions to the initial 11 interview questions.

Participant Identification

Purposeful sampling was used in this study, because it was essential that the participants have had experiences with the phenomenon under consideration. There were several criteria participants had to meet to be eligible to participate in this study. Only participants who met the criteria were included in the study. Participants had to have taught online for at least 1 year, or 2 semesters; have a master's degree or a terminal degree; teach undergraduate social science courses; and take part in course construction for the online course for which they were sharing their experiences. Participants were initially identified through personal contacts. When those contacts were exhausted, snowball sampling was used, in which online instructors I know were contacted, and asked for referrals. Four online social science instructors were located through this method. Once that approach was exhausted, I searched for instructors through information listed on websites for universities and colleges.

A search on Google for *online learning* generated just under 2 million hits. The search results included links to websites that universities and colleges maintain, which include information on undergraduate online social science courses and programs. Public college and university websites were consulted to identify several departments in the social sciences, such as sociology, psychology, marketing, law, information sciences, communications, human development and family relations, education, anthropology, history, geography and public administration. The instructors' contact information was collected from the online directories. I visited the online learning links on the sites, and cross referenced the instructors who were listed as teaching online. Some universities

have the registration pages open to the public, which gave the courses the instructors were teaching or were slated to teach in the upcoming semester.

The search process was recorded and 239 invitations were sent to instructors at 13 universities and colleges, three of which were community colleges, while the remaining were 4-year universities. Instructors from 8 of the schools agreed to participate in this study. Initially, 18 people agreed to participate. Informed consent was secured once the instructor agreed to participate, as the appointment was being set. I interviewed 15 participants, including four community college instructors. Three of the instructors decided not to participate after initially agreeing.

Participant Demographics

Participant demographics were collected through the in depth interviews. The study was designed such that all the participants selected for inclusion have taught online for a minimum of 1 year. The majority of instructors who participated have taught for more than 1 year and in some cases, much more than 1 year. Table 2 shows how long the participants have been teaching, online.

Table 2

Number of Years Teaching Online

Time (Years)	No. of Instructors
1 – 5	7
5 – 10	6
> 10	2

All the participants who were included in this study were teaching in public colleges and universities. Table 3 shows the number of instructors who teach at 4 year colleges and universities, as well as the number of instructors who teach at community colleges.

Table 3

Number of Instructors, by Setting

Type of educational institution	No. of instructors
4-Year college or university	11
Community college	4

Participant Profiles

Participant 1

P1 teaches at a large state university. He has been teaching online for 11 years. He teaches courses in information technology services (ITS), both online and in the face to face learning environment. P1 feels that the structure necessary to teach online is well suited to his personality. He believes that emerging technologies are valuable for online instruction and learning.

Participant 2

P2 has taught in the online learning environment for 4 years. She teaches sociology at a large state university. P2 has taught online and in the face to face learning setting. She teaches students who are specifically enrolled in her school's online program. P2 has never taken an online course, though she has taken online training seminars. She has seen rapid and significant changes in online instruction since she first experienced it.

Participant 3

P3 has taught for 16 years. He teaches at a large online university that is part of a large state university system. He teaches upper level psychology courses. He has taught in face to face courses, but is only teaching online now. P2 serves as a course chairperson, and is responsible for the oversight of that course. P2 prizes creative thinking, and the development critical thinking skills, which he believes will prepare students to move into their next role as a professional.

Participant 4

P4 teaches Introduction to Public Administration online at a large state university. The course P4 teaches online is a junior level course that has an on campus counterpart. P4 primarily teaches face to face courses at his school. He has been teaching this particular course for 3 or 4 years. He believes the adult students he works with are more responsive to his direction than traditional learners and they produce high quality work.

Participant 5

P5 is a full time instructor with a community college. She teaches Introduction to Psychology as well as Abnormal Psychology, both online. She also teaches face to face courses in psychology. She has been teaching online for 3 years. She is actively involved with college committees, including the hiring committee and the assessment committee. P5 believes online learning is the wave of the future and instructors “who do not hop on the train will be left behind.”

Participant 6

P6 has been involved with online learning since 2005. She teaches Social Stratification at a large state university. Her experiences with online instruction are not limited to the classroom. As a graduate student, she served on the curriculum committee as the online instruction representative, since she was the only one who had taught online. In graduate school, she had taken an online course, which at the time was run like a correspondence course. P6 admitted she failed miserably at learning online. She classifies herself as a procrastinator and for this reason believes online learning was not for her.

Participant 7

P7 is a trained psychotherapist who teaches psychology at a community college, in a full-time position in the eastern United States. She has been teaching there since 1997, and started teaching online several years ago. She teaches online as well as in person. P7 serves on the distance learning committee, which in part sets policy for the distance learning program. She is active in the development of courses for the psychology department.

Participant 8

P8 teaches communications, face to face as well as online, at the community college level. She has been teaching online for 7 years. P8 has developed an Intro to Speech Communication course for her college. She teaches part time for another online university, as well. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, P8 serves is a course

reviewer for the community college; she reviews classes being taught by other online instructors. She is actively involved in a peer review group for online instructors.

Participant 9

P9 is an adjunct faculty member at a community college in the midwestern United States. She teaches Introduction to Psychology and Human Development in the online learning setting. Previously, she taught in face to face classes, but now teaches online exclusively. She has taught online for 3 years. P9 also works as a juvenile probation officer, and she uses her work experiences to offer her students real life examples. P9 lives in a remote area and appreciates the flexibility online teaching offers.

Participant 10

P10 teaches in a very large research university in the southwestern United States. He considers himself a researcher first and a teacher second. He has taught at his school for 44 years and is near retirement. P10 taught for 38 years in the face to face classroom and has spent the last 5 or 6 years, teaching online. P10 teaches various courses in the history and geography department. One of his most popular courses is the History of Piracy. His classes are extremely large, with between 150 and 200 students. His research is in military history.

Participant 11

P11 has been designing online courses for 3 years and teaching online courses for 1 year. She is a tenured instructor at a very large research university. She teaches Japanese American Experience and Introduction to Diversity, both online. She has taught these courses, as well as others in the Women's Studies in the face to face classroom as

well. She is the Director for the Asian American Studies at her school. She enjoys teaching online, but misses the personal interaction with the students.

Participant 12

P12 teaches at a very large university in the southwest US. She is a full time, non-tenured lecturer. She teaches Introduction to Sociology, as well as a few upper level sociology classes. P12 has been teaching at the school for 10 years, the last 3 completely online. Prior to teaching online, she used the online discussion board, as well as computerized tests, as a way to be more environmentally responsible. She has extremely large online classes, with as many as 400-600 in upper level classes and 1000 students in her introductory classes. P12 typically has between 2000 and 3000 students per semester.

Participant 13

P13 teaches social marketing, distributed teams, and global teams through the Information Systems and Technology (IST) department at a large state university in the northeastern US. She has been teaching online for nearly 2 years. Her online courses are for students completing an online degree. Her courses are upper class level courses, and they are required for the IST degree. P13 also has taught in face to face courses.

Participant 14

P14 is an online instructor at a large state university in the Midwest US. She teaches courses in Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS). P14 teaches exclusively online; she has not taught in the face to face classroom. Her research and professional goals are in the area of professional development in new human services

professionals. She was on the team that initiated the online degree for HDFS at her university.

Participant 15

P15 is an instructor at a large public university on the East coast of the US. For 5 years, she has taught a course, Organizational Communication, in both the Business School, and the School of Communications. She is the assistant vice provost, and the distance learning and summer program director as well.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) method. I conducted the data analysis in a traditional manner, without the use of any computer software programs, such as Word or Atlas-ti. Initially, I engaged in the epoche process wherein I wrote out my experiences with the phenomenon of online learning and online teaching, then set those ideas aside, releasing any bias, preconceived ideas, and expectations regarding online learning; all in preparation to read through the instructors' experiences. The digital recordings were transcribed and the transcripts were stored independently of the recordings, to maintain privacy and confidentiality. The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim.

A member check was conducted to verify the findings. When the interviews were transcribed, the participants were sent a letter (Appendix E) asking them to review the interview transcript. At that time, the participants were asked to correct, clarify, extend, and remove anything that did not represent their experiences teaching and assessing student learning in the online learning environment.

Moustakas (1994) explained that the process of reduction is long and detailed. Through the process, the data is read repeatedly by the researcher, to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. Initially, I listened to the audio recordings of the interviews. After the audio files were reviewed, the corresponding transcripts were read two times, first taking mental notes, then taking notes in the margins. The transcriptions were set aside for a short period and allowed to incubate (Moustakas, 1994). After a few days, I read through the transcript again, and using different color markers, highlighted similar ideas, color coding them. For example, all the statements pertaining to academic honesty were highlighted in pink, statements pertaining to discussion board postings were highlighted in green, and so on. This process was followed for each of the 15 participants.

Once each transcript was marked up by hand, and all the horizons were identified for each participant, similar horizons were grouped together. The similar ideas were grouped by their language and textual meaning; for example, cheating and copying were considered similar ideas, therefore they were grouped together. Statements that were not representative of the experience or those which were not able to be labeled were not considered to be a constituent of the experience and were eliminated. Relevant quotes and passages with details that encapsulated the idea were included, for future reference.

Once the invariant constituents were identified, themes were extracted and labeled by grouping the related invariant constituents. When about 65% of the instructors responded in a similar way, it was considered a theme of the study. If within the theme, over 50% of the participants identified a specific thought or issue, it was labeled as a

subtheme of the theme. Ideas identified by fewer than 8 instructors were not considered a theme or subtheme of the study. Themes, subthemes, and invariant constituents were validated by checking them against the interview transcriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Appendix C presents examples of horizons and their related themes and subthemes. The horizons included in the table do not encompass the full list of horizons; rather a sampling of horizons that were identified through the analysis of the transcribed interviews.

The themes that emerged were as follows:

1. Online instructors use a combination of assessment practices.
2. Changes to assessments based on student feedback.
3. Academic honesty.

Table 4 shows the breakdown of the themes and subthemes, by the participants for whom the theme emerged during analysis.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes Identified, by Participant

Themes and subthemes	Participants who identified themes
Instructors use a combination of assessment practices	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
Assignments	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14
Discussion	2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15
Testing	3, 5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
Changes to assessments based on student feedback	2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, 14, 15
Academic honesty	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15
Other people May be completing assigned work	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 15
Violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies	1, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 15

Findings

Theme 1: Online Instructors Use a Combination of Assessment Practices

This study was designed to depict the assessment practices of online instructors. To accomplish this, semistructured interviews were conducted. The participants were asked general questions about how they assess student learning, how they evaluate their learning assessments to ensure they actually assess what they purport, and how instruction may change as a result of what the assessments uncovered. There were 12 initial questions (Appendix B), as instructors shared their experiences, follow up questions were asked to clarify or extend my understanding of the individual instructors' experiences. As a result of the interviews, all the participants explained the combination of assessment practices they use to assess student learning in their online classes.

The instructors included in this study all worked for public universities and colleges. They shared a common thread, and that is they have nearly complete freedom to construct their courses and assignments as they see fit. The instructors explained that as long as they are meeting the course objectives, the instructors have no limitations to what they do within the classroom platform.

> Faculty people have a lot of academic freedom to go and try things and do what they want as long as they don't do anything really far out wacko. You generally do not ever hear about someone being scolded for trying something or doing something new. (P1)
>
> The university has policies which give us a great deal of latitude regarding the assessment procedures and faculty take full advantage of that, with things like the authentic assessment and opportunity to use both multiple choice and essay final exams. (P3)
>
> We have to abide by the course objectives and the outcomes and then, we make our own syllabus, but its mandatory that we do have the outcomes and objective and I then fill in the chapters that we'll be doing and the assignments. (P5)
>
> I have complete academic freedom in my classroom. (P10)

In this study, it was clear that all the participants use a combination of the 4 types of assessments to assess student learning; discussions, tests, assignments, and group projects. Of the 15 participants, 14 participants use discussions, 12 use tests, 12 use assignments such as group projects or weekly short answer questions, and five use group projects. The instructors assess student learning in a wide variety of ways. Nearly half of

the instructors interviewed utilize a combination of three types of assessments to appraise student learning. Five of 15 instructors use two assessment approaches to assess student learning. The remaining instructors use a mixture of all four types of assessment tools, assignments, group projects, discussions, and testing, to assess student learning. Table 5 shows the break down of the various combinations of assessments that instructors use to assess learning in the online learning environment.

Table 5

Combinations of Assessments Used

# of assessments used	Assessment approaches	No. of instructors
2 Types	Assignments and discussions	4
	Assignments and tests	1
3 Types	Assignments, discussions, and tests	5
	Group projects, discussions, and tests	2
4 Types	Assignments, group projects, discussions, and tests	3

Subtheme 1: Assignments.

Assignments were a large part of the conversation on assessment in online learning. Twelve of the 15 instructors indicated that they use assignments to assess student learning. There were two types of assignments; written work, and group assignments. Ten of the twelve instructors use written assignments. For the instructors who assign written work, the assignments include research papers, short answer questions, short essays, and reflection papers. The written assignments varied widely, by instructor.

They have an individual essay, which is a 2-3 page essay and they have a choice of 2 options. (P2)

They have 2 major written assignments . . . a position paper, which is an argument paper and a literature review . . . They get to pick a topic. They do not need me to approve the topic. I give some broad suggestions around the topic areas in the syllabus and a handful of students will check in with me about their topics, but most will pick a topic that is in the framework of the course. (P3)

There are 11 assignments . . . They have some readings and then I give some assignments. And there are materials, additional readings that I have on there as well as the text book. And then there are questions that they have to submit and I grade. (P4)

Writing assignments, with online, we do have an assignment where students will have to read a research article, because of course in psychology, the main thing is always research. Students have to be able to take something that was researched and analyze that as far as determine the hypothesis and methods used to research and how to understand what the results are of that research. (P5)

I really don't use quizzes or tests. I primarily use written stuff . . . every 5 weeks, they have a major assignment. After the first 5 weeks, I usually have them do something related to learning how to do research online . . .then the next one is I just have them do a book review . . . (P6)

> And then I have them write 2 short papers. One is a review of a journal article . . . They choose the topic, anything to do with psychology . . . the second paper involves . . .writing a paper about their [students'] own learning. (P7)
>
> There are also 3 Learning Modules where they have to answer 2 out of 3 questions. They are complex questions . . . Some students turn in 13 or 14 pages for the modules. (P10)
>
> I use a wide variety of assessments . . . short essay assignments, short research papers . . . I write my own questions. (P13)

Group projects emerged as a horizon for six of the 12 participants. Some instructors indicated they use group projects in an impromptu manner as they see that the students need to change directions, in contrast to group assignments that are planned before the semester starts. Five of the six participants incorporate the group project into the course construction. The instructors who use group work reasoned that group projects prepare the students for their future professional roles. The instructors recognize that group projects are not well liked by most online students, but they believe that in many fields, professionals collaborate in virtual teams, which is why the instructors include them in their online courses.

> Well, in general, everyone hates the team based assignment . . .I keep it in there because it fits in with some of the philosophy of the college was that this course lies within, which is be leaders, be able to work in teams, and so on. And, I hate to say it, but now a-days, that means being able to work in virtual teams, where you may never meet the people face to face. (P1)

> Students would prefer—most distance students that I come in contact with would prefer no group work, but that's not the way it works . . . there are group projects and that is the way we teach in the college of ISP. We always have group projects, because they [students] have to learn to work in teams for this job. (P13)
>
> For sure, as you can imagine, most people approach the group work with a great deal of concern, unless they have had a good experience . . . but what I really feel in theory and I really feel it stresses to them is that part of our growth process is realizing that it is going to be frustrating to work with people who have different perspectives but the best we can do is to ascertain what strengths we all bring to the group setting and how to learn to effectively demonstrate those and work collectively with others to bring out a final product. (P14)

In addition to rationalizing why team work is included in their courses, four of the instructors explained how the teams are developed. The instructors seem to use different ways to form groups. The common denominator is that instructors use the method they believe will offer their students a positive group experience. To achieve this, three instructors use student self selection.

> I just learned that there is a group manager option that allows you to set up and the students self select the groups. (P8)
>
> What they do is they select themselves based on what they want their case studies to be. So there's a sign up sheet that goes on the home page of the course so that early in the course they decide, "Oh, I want to be in that group because I like that movie." (P14)

> They self select the group. And from my experience, once they self select for one of the assignments and it goes well, they keep the group for the final, but I allow them to change if that is needed. (P15)

One instructor assigns teams. She explained her reasoning for assigning teams rather than having the students self select their group mates. Past experience has taught her that team construction is critical to the success of the teams.

> And what I started doing is pairing students up according to when they submit their initial assignments. And so, if they are early submitters, I don't pair them up with late submitters, because that can cause a lot of conflict. There are students that life to get their work done early, and I put them together. And that seems to make a big difference. (P13)

Finally, half the instructors, for whom group projects emerged as a horizon, explained how the group projects were graded. All three instructors recognized individual efforts must be reflected in the grades assigned for the project. For the instructors, peer evaluations serve to reflect the individual efforts.

> They [students] are given 2 grades. The first one is the project, itself. So they are graded on their design document and their presentation. And everyone gets the same grade on that. But, for their teamwork, I have a self evaluation form that they complete. So, you go into it and you rate yourself, and you rate all your other team members on a number of different criteria. (P1)

> There are 2 ways I have done it. One is there is a group grade and then that grade is adjusted higher or lower depending on the peer evaluations. Another way I

> have done it is they receive 2 grades. One for the peer evaluations and one for the project and I usually weight half of the total grade for peer evaluations. (P13)
>
> Well the presentation is not the major part of the grade, because we understand the different skills for that, and that is not required for the course. The students are graded by the final paper. (P15)

Subtheme 2: Discussions.

Fourteen of the 15 instructors rely on discussions to assess student learning. Discussions emerged as a theme for nine of the 15 participants. The instructors reported that discussions are conducted between four and 15 times during a semester. Some of the instructors indicated that they schedule the discussion in consideration of the other assessments. These instructors seem to consider how the discussions fit with the other assignments for the course.

> They either have an individual essay, which is a two to three page essay…and the other half of the class is an online discussion. And it's intermixed, so they either have the essay or the online discussion . . . It's a discussion board where there's two parts to it, where they do an initial posting by Thursday and by Sunday evening they have to respond . . . I have it set up in the syllabus that one week they have a discussion and then the next week, they have an individual essay. (P2)
>
> We have about 6 discussion posts. They [students] don't do discussions on the weeks where they do the modules and I give them a week off for the break and the week prior to the learning modules off. (P10)

> It's a weekly thing. We package things in weekly units, basically, so we have a lesson and readings and a discussion topic and then the interactive quiz and then sporadically we have assignments as they build, but the main components, lesson, reading, quiz. (P14)

The majority of instructors who identified discussions as a main idea require initial discussion posts, in response to a discussion prompt; and response posts, in response to the posts of other students. Of the nine instructors, all but one instructor (P10) grade the discussion posts according to the content the students include. The instructors require that discussion posts are substantial.

> I try to have them incorporate material from the class and a lot of the discussions are based on the material. (P2)
>
> I've developed a grading rubric that says, "You should log in and participate in any discussion. It doesn't have to be thread a, thread b, or thread c, but I need to see you in there making some comment or some statement . . . you're graded on the content and quality of your participation." (P3)
>
> The assessment for me is on the discussion board where the students have to log in and post a 400 word post from a prompt that I give them and then they have to respond to posts by their classmates of a substantive response of about 150 words. (P11)

Several of the instructors indicated that discussions are a valuable component of online learning. According to six of the nine instructors, discussions provide a rich

source for student interaction and engage learners. They believe that student interaction and engagement is important for learning in the online setting.

> You have all these people with great interesting experiences and jobs all over the place, and they never got to talk to each other. They never got to share their experiences about work, so we added these discussions to try to get them a little more involved in discussion work/family policies, or issues in the workplace or technology. That way, they could share information of themselves, what they were doing, what they were seeing. (P2)

> When you walk into the discussion and you see 143 introductory comments, that's enough to send anyone screaming from the room and I tell my students you know one of the challenges of only checking in once a week is you walk in and instead of seeing four or five people around your dining room, instead, you walk into a banquet hall and that is so scary and you think, 'I am never going to read all this'. So many just won't bother, but then, that is the heart of our conversation, and the heart of our learning, and so we talk about that. (P8)

> Well, I think for me, the discussion boards have been eye opening. I think I was a little bit suspicious about online learning and I think there are certain things you lose, particularly with sensitive things, like race relations not being in person, but I found that the students, the ones who did participate really took it seriously, especially on the discussion board and they responded with each other. I was really pleased with the intellectual community that I felt developed, because they

> were really writing to each other back and forth. They were really engaging with each others' ideas. (P11)
>
> There are lots of interactions. Discussions are a huge expectation of all of our courses and we try to make them very relevant and engaging, definitely open ended so students have the opportunity to provide authentic responses to the material and make it relevant to their own life. (P14)

Discussions are also valuable online because all the students are required to participate. Several instructors remarked that the asynchronous discussions require participation, which they noted was much different than in a face to face learning environment where students might attend, but not participate.

> You know, I think I have the feeling that in their discussions, because they have to write do much and everyone has to participate, I feel like I've got a better sense that the students are doing the work and learning than I do sometimes in my face to face class, such as the quiet ones who never say anything. (P7)
>
> Discussions are a lot less in the face to face courses. The classes are 400 kids and the discussions are not productive. In online classes, the discussions are good, because the students don't have to worry about saying something stupid in the class like they do in the face to face class. (P10)
>
> Here, I had 40 people posting regularly, so I knew what 40 of the people were doing whereas before [in a face to face classroom], I would only know when it came time for the essay or the exam. (P11)

For three out of the nine instructors, discussions also offer instructors the opportunity to provide feedback to students concerning their work.

> And so I grade their discussions each week and give them feedback and comments and suggestions and stuff. (P7)

> When I am reading their discussion posts, you know, I try to show them how to do the citations correctly in the text. And I say, "Here's the way the textbook does the citations, just cut and paste it at the end of your post." And so I do a lot of talking about APA in the discussion posts. And then, I do into talking about the posts in general and whether they bring up a good point or not . . . (P9)

> For the first three to four weeks, well actually for the first three weeks, I responded to every initial post and then after that my TA responded the next four or five weeks and then after that she just did summary posts for them…that's really key I think in making sure these students understand what is expected of them on these discussion boards . . .Well, with the discussion board, I really like to ask them for their questions and push them for their analysis. It is the best way to give immediate feedback, well, not immediate, but I say, "Okay, this is what we read. Bring in the things from the reading and see what you think" . . . And, so I try to model that in the discussion board. I usually give about three sentences per person per post. And it is usually about some of the content of else I have to remind them, I say, "This is really interesting, but it isn't what the assignment asked you to do." So that's the immediate feedback that they get. (P11)

Discrepant Cases

Several discrepant cases surfaced as a result of the data analysis on discussions. There was 1 case where the instructor's experiences varied from the rest in a notable way; P4 did not use discussions in his class. The course is called a 'flexible learning course' and was described as a correspondence course conducted online.

> It called a flexible learning, so it's whenever they submit stuff and then I grade it. It's up to them…Traditionally it was [a correspondence course], now it is electronic. So, traditionally, there were written materials and paper materials were sent to them and then they submitted and like that. Now, it's all done electronically, online. (P4)

According to the instructor, the course is assessed in the following way:

> So, there's 11 assignments. They have some readings, and then I give some assignments. And there are materials—additional readings that I have on there as well as the text book. And then there are questions that they have to submit and then I grade; [I] give them grades and then feedback from there. (P4)

Despite this course design, the instructor expressed a desire to conduct the course from a more traditional online approach, "…hopefully we'll be doing some more online stuff where we have a class start on a certain date"; and in a way that encourages some interaction.

> Yeah, more of a chat room kind of a thing. I have been thinking about it—I don't know how it would work, because all the kids are at different levels, but I thought

> that might be of interest to see if it can help each other. So, that is something I have been thinking about doing. (P4)

Of the 15 instructors I interviewed, this participant was the only one who does not implement discussions in any form. According to many of the instructors included in this study, asynchronous and synchronous discussions serve as an important assessment point in online classes; therefore P4's experiences with assessment in the online learning environment is atypical in this group of instructors. Participant 4s data was considered in the context of this difference. The data was included in the study, because his perspective is important to understand in terms of how assessment is influenced by course design.

Discussions did emerge as a horizon for P15; however, the instructor's experiences varied from the group's experiences in a significant way. This instructor uses synchronous discussions in her classroom, while all the others use asynchronous discussions. The discussions are weekly, and take place at a predetermined time.

> They show up like they were in a regular classroom and you just conduct your regular class activities, so you conduct them virtually instead…We use Wimba. The Wimba is live interaction all the time . . . So, the Wimba is like being in a regular classroom. All the students are seen when they speak and all the students are heard when they speak and you have live interaction. It's remote live interaction. (P15)

In the past, P15 taught this class asynchronously. Recently, she switched the course to the blended format, so there are an additional three f2f sessions that take place

during the course. The first includes instruction on how to use the technology in the course. As one would expect, the first f2f session occurs at the very beginning of the course. The second and third f2f sessions are held so that the students can present their projects to the class. These additional two sessions are not discussion based. The instructor indicated that she believes that the interaction a live course offers is valuable and because of the development of readily available and low cost technology, she incorporates the synchronous discussion sessions as a means to apply best practices to her online instruction.

> Well, I was always involved with a group of faculty that was doing research for online learning, so I was always trying to look at best practices, but when I started to teach online, the system that I opted at that time, first of all, the tools that we had were very different than now. We didn't have so much for the audio and video for live classroom . . . In any event I feel that things were happening much more asynchronous . . . And very soon, things changed and the price of technology has changed tremendously . . . and I think actually that made me adopt this position of mandatory portable camera, headset microphone, and adopting these weekly interaction sessions. (P15)

Another discrepant case is P3. He also includes real time discussions in his class, although they are conducted via chat room and not required. He offers these sessions as a way to review material for the exam. He believes these sessions are helpful for students who want more interaction with the material, or for those who have specific questions on the content or the exams.

> What I do sometimes, and this is completely optional for the students is [sic] to have a synchronous, real time chat to prepare for the final exam. And I do this as an optional event and I download a transcript of the entire chat so that the students who do not participate can see the discussion in the form of a Word document. (P3)

P3 finds that these synchronous discussions are mutually beneficial. They are helpful for him, because they help him assess student learning. At the same time, the discussions help students interact with the content to prepare for the final exam.

> What is interesting is that I run the chat as if it were face to face, and so I'll ask them . . ."Okay, someone tell me what Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love is—John, can you answer that? Jane, what do you think are the primary sexual motivations for men and women? Are they different?" So I'll put all these sorts of questions out there and the student who knows the answer right off the bat will start typing very quickly after the questions are put out there, whether I put it out for a specific student or just to the group in general. And then the student who doesn't know clearly is thumbing through the book or something and you see their answer come back like 30 or 40 seconds later . . . They like the opportunity to ask certain questions, guided and directed on the material for the final . . . The students who don't participate usually post something in response to the chat transcript, such as "Oh, I had wished I had been there" or "That was a great question- yes I was wondering the same thing." (P3)

P10 has a different outlook on the discussion posts. He places a heavier value on the learning modules the students complete, which are similar to a research paper based on question prompts, rather than the discussions. P10 does not expect much from his students in terms of content.

> Discussions are graded on participation, so if a student participates, they get credit. If they can string together 2 sentences on a topic, they get credit. They get ticks off if they don't participate frequently, and get ticks up if they participate all the time. (P10)

Subtheme 3: Testing.

Testing is the second subtheme which emerged from the theme of Assessment tools that instructors use. Tests emerged as a horizon for nine instructors. Some instructors labeled tests as *exams*, while other called them *quizzes*. The protocol was the same for all the instructors: students read and learned material and then took some type of test on what they learned. The instructors indicated that tests serve two purposes; tests enable instructors to assess learning and tests also provide students with additional learning opportunities. The overwhelming majority of instructors used multiple choice test items. Instructors either wrote their own items, used test bank items, or a combination of the two. For five instructors, the tests are an effective assessment point.

> I believe again that the final exam is probably one of the most important assessment points. (P3)

> Testing is the best way to see if they [students] really understand the information. (P5)

> It's an open note test and it's timed and they have to really know. The time really does show if they know the stuff or not, and they have a limit to what they can look up. They don't have a lot of time to look up stuff and so I think for me, it works in terms of making sure they understand and for me to evaluate their learning. (P11)
>
> I write questions that test whether or not the students got the theories they read about in the chapter, whether they are able to apply the theories…but I am not trying to trip them up, I am just trying to see if they get it. (P12)
>
> I prepare the quizzes so I know I can assess [learning] and also give them [students] incentive to do the readings. (P13)

The other four instructors explained that tests serve as a way for students to learn the material, in addition to assessment purposes. Instructors indicated that tests are intended to encourage students to read the material and offer their students more interaction with content.

> And I do have a couple knowledge assessments, although I am not a fan of the multiple choice, true and false, fill in the blank [quiz items]. And on the quizzes, sometimes we take them as collaborative quizzes and I will post them in the discussion board and I'll say, "What do you think is the right answer and why?" And then I tell them they can make an argument why all of them are partially right and so we work through that. (P8)
>
> I use the quizzes more as a reference for them to learn a little bit more about the material and for them to delve further into the textbook, because I have found that

> a lot of my students if I just provide everything there, they are just going to do the minimal . . . this was just the way to ensure that they are getting the material and I see they are having to read. (P9)
>
> We want the students to have the change to go back and rework concepts that are not self evident. I tell them up front, "It's not the only way to assess your learning. It's more of a tool to help you interact with the content more and exercise the use of some of the concepts." (P14)
>
> The quizzes are basically to make sure they are keeping up with the reading, so basically they are multiple choice or true and false questions related to the conversation for that week and the reading assignments for that week. (P15)

Theme 2: Changes to Assessments Based on Student Feedback

The second theme to emerge was changes to assessments based on student feedback, for 10 out of 15 participants. According to the instructors participating in this study, these changes are made at any time during or after the course; via email; within the course platform, such as in discussion prompts and activities completed as part of the course; through informal requests for feedback from instructors; on RateMyProfessors.com, both at the request of the instructor or not; and student evaluations conducted at the end of the course. Two instructors observed that students in the online learning environment are much more apt to contact an instructor than students in a f2f course.

> I think in general, students are much more willing to engage the faculty member in things they like and things they don't like. (P1)

> I would tell you that nobody would come to my office to complain to me about the things they send me emails for. (P8)

Changes to the assessments, have resulted from student feedback for 7 of the 10 participants. Some changes to assessments are made because students have contacted the instructor at some point during the semester and asked for specific things to be changed. These immediate changes are usually small and specific to the assessment they might be struggling with.

> Some people will email me and say, "Oh, you know, I can't write that fast, can I have another 30 minutes?" And, I don't have a problem spending the time for people who contact me. (P2)

> They said they wanted to be allowed for more time [on exams and quizzes], because I was limiting them to 60 minutes for a 50 question exam and now I am giving them 75 minutes and that has seemed to give them some breathing room where if they have some kind of technical snafu, they will still be able to finish the test. So I have made that adjustment. (P12)

> And I change things based on direct feedback and immediate feedback and you know in fact in the first week, there was some feedback about a deadline and students really felt like they wanted some more time to develop their goals and objectives for their internship and so I thought that was a valid request, so of course, I extended the deadline. So, definitely on a day to day basis I am willing to do that. (P14)

Changes also result from feedback the students give after the class, either in a course evaluation form, in the course platform in a discussion post, or by personal email. According to 6 of the 10 instructors, these course changes are often larger, and involve rewriting questions, reconstructing course projects, or revamping or developing course elements.

> This last semester, we revised the course and we've added four discussions from the feedback from the students. They were saying that they liked the discussions and wished there were more. (P2)
>
> Things I would change would be like might be rubrics. If I find it isn't really getting to it, or not working quite right, or might be someone is getting too many points for grammar and they are not really learning it, but they are passing through. It's those things I change pretty regularly. (P6)
>
> I listen at the end of the class to see whether they liked it or not, if they [course assignments] were more time consuming and make changes based on that . . . And, I really have changed a lot of things by listening to the students in the class. (P9)
>
> The end of the year course evaluations are helpful in helping me tweak whatever I need to redesign. (P13)
>
> For sure, as you can imagine most people approach the group work with a great deal of concern unless they have had a good experience . . . The project I have had- well I guess for three semesters, I have had the group project. I made some pretty big changes to it based on students' feedback and I think over time it's

> gotten to a point where it really works smoothly and I really look forward to it. (P14)
>
> And, yeah, we have at the end of the semester the course evaluation form that the students complete and that's also how it's revealed to make sure that if any change is needed for the future semester can be adopted [sic]. (P15)

Overall, instructors look very favorably on the opportunity to receive feedback. The instructors explained that the feedback enables them to effectively make updates and changes to their assessments and courses. The instructors seem to believe that making the changes is in the best interest of their future students.

> I ask them to send me an email with their ideas and thoughts for how I can improve the class and my instruction. And I ask them to send me those after grades are due. (P6)
>
> I try to check in with students, not exactly mid semester, it's earlier. My first week we try to do a get to know each other posting and taking a quiz and stuff, and after we do a few weeks of regular chapters, I ask people to comment, "How's it going? Are there things we should change?" (P7)
>
> I designed into the course a component of their grade that focused on assessment— Their assessment of the course and their assessment of the assessment process of this course…So, I really sat back and was largely an observer during much of that session. And when I got stuck I told them, "Okay, I have written this quiz for you I think its good but the little voice in my head said might be its not. So, you have a choice, you can either take the quiz and just

> submit your score and that's it; or you can take the quiz, then in lieu of your score- however high or low it is, you can give me critical feedback on whether you think I actually achieved the learning goal that we were seeking." Most of the students gave me feedback, whether their score was high or low. And, I thought that was marvelous. They were so generous. (P8)
>
> I am really big at the end of the class, I have a final post where I ask the students, and they get credit for the post, like any other, and I ask them, "What do you feel about this class? What do you think needs to be improved? How can you help future students so they can have a positive learning experience in this class?" (P9)

Theme 3: Academic Honesty

Academic honesty was a theme that emerged for 10 out of 15 participants. The instructors offered commentary and concerns about academic honesty when asked to share their concerns with assessing online learning and the challenges of assessing online learning. As expected, the instructors seemed to be aware that academic honesty in online learning is a concern among members of the academic community. Within the theme of academic honesty, some instructors explained that they have talked with colleagues about academic honesty concerns within the academic community.

> One of the things that people struggled with on the curriculum committee, especially some of the older people that had been teaching for many, many years, there was this belief that the only reason people took online classes is because they are just trying to cheat the system. You didn't really do it because you wanted to learn or because you couldn't just get to a traditional course

> environment. You just did it because you couldn't do it on your own and you needed help from your mom, your uncle, or the person sitting there. You needed help. (P6)
>
> I hear that [not the real student taking the test] as a concern raised by people who don't teach online. (P8)

Also, several instructors explained that they have experienced academic honesty issues in their classrooms and described how they evaluate the students' written work for academic honesty. It was clear that computer technology makes plagiarism easily identifiable.

> I did use Turnitin this semester, because I had a situation where I was thinking, "This is really good." Then I thought, "Wait, this is too good." I literally just copied and pasted it into Google search and it pulled up the article right away. (P2)
>
> I'll just take a section and search it and if I have a concern about what they are saying…and I go in and check their sources and see where they got their information. (P9)
>
> There is a difference between plagiarism and paraphrasing. The plagiarism jumps out at you. There are times where the students had copied it word for word and it is pretty easy to recognize. All I have to do is do a quick search on Google and it comes up pretty quickly. (P10)

Further, instructors considered their feelings on academic honesty in the context of their teaching approaches and philosophy on education. Some instructors believe that

in the ‘real world’, professionals are able to look up the material; these instructors reasoned that in the classroom, it is acceptable for their students to look up material when they take tests.

> The quizzes, they went from proctored to being nonproctored. So, I have seen a jump in scores from proctored to nonproctored? Probably a little bit, because I don’t explicitly tell them. I don’t say, “Consider this is closed book, please don’t cheat.” And, by cheat I mean look up course content, I don’t tell them, because I don’t really care. If some of the quiz questions have to do with some HTML formatting, for example, and they might not remember and in real life, they’re going to just go and look this stuff up, anyway, so I am okay with that. (P1)
>
> It hasn’t presented a challenge for me, because of the nature of the course . . . if you think it can’t be open book, I think different alternatives must be considered . . . If you are comfortable designing the assessments with an open book, then I am fine with that. (P15)

As a result the data analysis, two subthemes emerged with regard to academic honesty: (a) other people might be completing the assigned work, and (b) violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies**.**

Subtheme 1: Other people might be completing assigned work.

Nine of the 15 instructors shared a feeling that online students might have other people complete assignments and tests. The instructors used expressions of uncertainty, such as “I am not sure,” “I will never know”, and “I wonder if” as they talked about their

concerns that the students might not be the ones who have completed the work they submit.

> And I've also had instances where there are always a couple people each semester, you know, you wonder if they're really doing their work, because they take the exams and they don't do well on the exams, and they don't do the essays. Its almost as if it's brand new material to them, when they did the homework and did very well in the homework . . . you know, with online, anybody could do the work. (P2)
>
> I am not sure the other person on the other end is really taking the course . . . I can have Samantha sign up for my course but her mom's an expert in abnormal psych, and takes all her tests online for her. (P5)
>
> I get concerned that it's them doing it or if it is really someone else doing it. (P9)

In addition to being concerned that students are not doing the work they hand in, instructors also realized that students might be copying from a book or other sources, such as websites. Several instructors reasoned that the online learning environment makes copying and pasting easier, since students are already online for their classes.

> The plagiarism typically comes in the fact that they just completely just copy the answers to the questions right out of the textbook. (P2)
>
> Or did they get that from a book and have the book directly in front of them…so as far as seeing if they really grasp that material? I can't really. (P5)
>
> I suppose plagiarism is one of the ones that I guess most people have a concern about, mainly because it's so easy in an online environment. If I am already

> trying to pull information from other sites, it's so easy to just copy and paste, so I think it's probably my biggest concern. (P6)

Subtheme 2: Violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies.

Instructors also believed that violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies. The strategies are implemented through course design. The strategies the instructors talked about were plagiarism services, proctored exams, and prolonged engagement on the discussion board.

> When somebody asked me about that last fall, I said, well, one of the reasons I ask them to post their name and a photograph is so later on, when I see the videos, I say, yeah, I recognize them, but it also puts them on notice . . . also, my assessments rely on personal experience, and the things you said previously in the classroom, so they are having to synthesize and explain why and since we get to know one another personally, very well, we have a real personal connection. (P8)
>
> You know, the thing is I think there is a greater chance of potential cheating although we have Safe Assignment, they have to turn all the essays in and it runs through the web, and—you know, that's how we catch a lot of plagiarism and it's a good way to deter it by telling them how it works. (P11)
>
> If you have the need to feel what the students are doing, or if you think it can't be open book, I think different alternatives must be considered . . . if faculty feel they need to bring students to a testing room, then we can assign it, then it would be blended then. And they [university support] find a date for that. (P15)

Six of the nine instructors argued that developing a personal connection through assignments affords the opportunity to get to know the students, because online learning is so writing intensive, the students' writing style and voice emerge, allowing academic honesty issues to surface.

> If you are already dialoguing with them . . . once you learn their writing style, its like hearing someone's voice—you know whether its them or not. (P5)
>
> You know intuitively the way they word things. Its like when you talk to someone, they end up with a tone of voice or a dialect in their writing that you pick up, so you know whether it is the same kid or not. If not . . . it becomes a red flag for you to look on the internet to see if they just pulled it and tried to pull the wool over your eyes. (P6)
>
> I mean, I can pretty much look at their papers and all of a sudden you have a student who has grammatically correct papers, my first thing is you have been making spelling and grammatical errors the whole semester, and now—what's going on here? People don't really change how they talk when they write. (P9)
>
> Because you get to see the students comments and contributions in class and you get to see what types of classes with the synchronous interactions and you get to see also the quizzes, so I think all together it allows you to get a better picture of how the student is handling the content for the reason if her or she is really doing it and following it. (P15)

Evidence of Quality

The study was conducted as explicitly designed in chapter 3. The participants included met all specified criteria. Several measures were taken to assure quality in this study. Throughout the process, researcher logs were kept to ensure quality. Prior to interviewing participants, and in accordance with Moustakas' (1994) approach, I recorded personal experiences with the phenomenon of online learning and included thoughts and feelings concerning my own assessment experiences in online learning. This enabled me to set aside any preconceived ideas or bias about assessing online learning. Directly following every interview, a research response was written to record reactions to the interview, as well as specific thoughts relevant to any aspect of the research. A sample of the larger body of responses is included in Appendix E.

In addition to recording the epoche and researcher responses, all the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. It was essential that the data accurately and appropriately reflected what was said in the interviews (Creswell, 2007). As the interviews were transcribed, the inflection in the instructors' voices was reflected in the transcripts; for example, when instructors paused or emphasized particular phrases, this was reflected in the transcripts with ellipses and bold font, respectively.

The data was validated with a member check. A letter was sent, via e-mail, requesting the participants permit me to send the document electronically, or requesting an address where the letter could be mailed via USPS (see Appendix E). One instructor requested that the document be mailed via the post office, and the remaining participants agreed to have the document sent electronically by e-mail. Participants were asked to

review their interview transcripts and extend, clarify, and/or correct anything they believed did not adequately reflect their experiences (see Appendix F). Of the instructors who responded, one confirmed that her responses reflect her experiences; one corrected the course number; one sent changes concerning the course name out of concern for her identity; two sent grammatical or typographical changes, which did not change the meanings of their responses; and two sent changes, where they changed the language, but did not change the meaning.

To ensure quality, rich description has been used to communicate the findings. According to several prominent experts in qualitative and naturalistic research, dense textural description makes it possible for the reader to understand the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; and Moustakas, 1994). Direct quotes were used to support the themes and subthemes and represent the participants' experiences.

Conclusion

Chapter 4 presented the findings for the present study. In depth interviews were conducted with 15 online instructors who teach social science courses. The interview transcripts were analyzed and three themes emerged; instructors use a combination of assessment practices, changes to assessments are based on student feedback, and academic honesty. Five subthemes emerged. Within Theme 1, instructors use a combination of assessment tools; assignments, discussions, and testing emerged as subthemes. Within Theme 3, academic honesty, other people might be completing the assigned work surfaced and violations of academic dishonesty can be avoided through

various strategies also surfaced as a subtheme. The discrepant cases and textural examples are included and serve to identify areas where more research is needed to understand the experiences of the instructors. All themes and subthemes were discussed and textural examples were provided to illustrate the themes. A discussion of how the findings are situated in the current literature as well as a complete discussion of the interpretation of the findings will be offered in chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Summary and Recommendations

Overview

Through an extensive literature review, a significant gap appeared in the literature concerning learning assessment in online learning, particularly from the perspective of instructors. The present phenomenological study was designed to contribute to the body of research on online education, by understanding the experiences of undergraduate social science instructors regarding their assessment practices in online courses. The study was conducted specifically to understand instructors' assessment practices in the online learning environment, and the challenges and benefits of assessing learning in the online learning environment. In depth interviews were conducted and digitally recorded. Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenology was utilized to analyze the data. As a result of the research model implemented, the present study provides a rich description of online instructors' experiences in the area of assessments in online education, in addition to the challenges and benefits that online instructors experience in assessing online learning.

To understand the phenomenon of assessment of online learning in social science courses, two research questions guided this study. The main research question was: What is the experience of online instructors regarding assessment practices in undergraduate social science classes? A secondary question was: What are the perceived challenges and benefits of assessment practices in the online learning environment?

Fifteen undergraduate social science instructors who teach online were interviewed in this qualitative study. Purposeful sampling was used to identify

instructors who met the criteria. The exact process for which was outlined in chapter 3. The instructors were asked to share their experiences with assessment in the online learning environment. The participants were asked a semistructured series of 15 questions, which included general questions on background experiences, benefits and challenges, and instructional strategies; as well as more specific questions concerning how the assessments are evaluated, how the results are used, and recommendations the instructors have for ways to assess online learning.

The data analysis revealed three themes; online instructors use a combination of assessment practices, changes to assessments are based on student feedback, and academic honesty. Five subthemes emerged, and include: assignments, discussions, testing, other people might be completing assigned work, and violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies. The themes and subthemes will be interpreted in the context of the conceptual framework, and understood by how they relate to the current literature on online learning and assessment practices in online learning. A complete discussion of the interpretation of the findings, implications for social change, and recommendations for action and future study will follow.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings presented in chapter 4 are contextualized by the current research on assessment in online learning, including the themes and ideas found in the larger body of research on the topic. The way that the three themes and five subthemes that emerged in the present study are situated in the present literature as well as the theoretical

frameworks of this study; social constructivism, and assessment theory in the college classroom will be presented in chapter 5.

Theme 1: Instructors Use a Combination of Assessment Practices

The participants included in this study teach in public universities and colleges. The instructors noted that they have complete academic freedom to construct the class in any way they believe will help students meet the learning objectives. No departmental or university rules govern the assessment practices of these instructors. The findings of this study indicated that instructors use a combination of assessment practices to assess learning. The combinations varied across the participants. Several instructors indicated they believe that using a wide range of assessment practices is valuable; where others explained they use fewer assessment practices. This finding is consistent with the larger body of research on assessment in online learning (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Russell et al., 2006; Woo & Reeves, 2008).

Gaytan and McEwen (2007) advocated that a wide range of assessment practices are necessary to assess how well students are meeting learning objectives. The participants indicated that they implement the combination of assessment practices that they feel best accomplish this. This finding suggests that assessment practices are a personally constructed aspect of teaching online. The implication is that the more instructors are informed concerning assessment practices in online learning and effective combinations of assessments, the better instruction will be.

The instructors also indicated that they talk with their peers and other professionals as they construct their assessment practices. It was clear that the instructors'

assessment practices were developed in the context of their professional and social relationships. Laker et al. (2008) contended that communities of practice, such as what the instructors described, offer teachers an excellent source of immediate, relevant, and non- threatening advice for new and inexperienced teachers. The fact that instructors consult other professionals as they construct their assessment practices suggests that peer support groups, and peer mentors might be useful in the professional development of new and inexperienced online instructors, which is consistent with the recommendations of Laker et al (2008).

Present research indicates that some instructors promote using assessments that require social interaction (Russell et al., 2006; Scagnoli et al., 2009). These educators view learning as a socially constructed experience (Biggs, 1996). Asynchronous discussions, chat sessions, group projects, and collaborative projects are typically used by educators who view learning in this way. Several instructors in this study rely heavily on these types of assessments, implying a constructivist perspective.

Subtheme 1: Assignments.

Legg et al. (2007) contended that students must be given the opportunity for authentic assessments, through which students learn to solve real world problems incorporated into class assignments. Authentic assessments serve to engage learners in a meaningful context. A group project is one way Legg et al. suggests that authentic assessment is achieved in the online learning environment. The findings of the present study support this assertion. Several participants use group projects to assess student learning. These participants openly admit that students do not like to work on group

projects in the online learning environment; however, they believe that group projects offer students practical experiences in working on virtual teams. The participants reasoned that in many professions, collaborating in groups at a distance is essential, and students must develop the abilities and skills needed to do so.

The instructors who implement group projects explained that the projects provide the students with an opportunity to engage in dialogue with their peers. This interaction is the essence of social constructivism. The literature indicates that through peer learning, such as what happens in group projects, students help one another construct knowledge (Eun, 2008; Legg et al., 2007; Powell & Kalina, 2009). The fact that these online instructors use group projects is valuable, because it helps to support the Legg et al. (2007) assertion that online education is intrinsically social constructivist.

Subtheme 2: Discussions.

According to the current literature on online learning, asynchronous discussions are a large aspect of the learning experience (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Darling-Hammond, & Baratz-Snowden, 2007). As expected, discussions emerged as a subtheme for the present study. During the interviews, the participants explained their particular requirements for discussions. The frequency and content of the discussions varied tremendously among the instructors. Some instructors require 4 discussions per semester, while others require 15; some require minimal postings that include a short answer, while others require 500 word posts and complete response postings. Despite these differences, discussions are used by 14 of the 15 instructors.

The participants argued that asynchronous discussions are an essential component in online learning. The instructors maintained that discussions serve to promote student interaction and engage the learners, which the participants believe advances learning. This idea is recurrent in recent literature on online learning (Baglione & Nastanski, 2007; Dengler, 2008; Phillips, 2005; Singh & Pan, 2004; and Vonderwell & Turner, 2005). The research indicated that discussions are particularly beneficial in the online learning environment because all the students in the class are required to participate; where in a traditional classroom, this might not be the case. Discussions effectively engage students in the online learning environment, because everyone participates. The participants echoed this sentiment in the interviews. The participants explained that there are some students in f2f courses, who hide in the room and rarely participate in discussions. One participant (P10) shared that when teaching in a traditional classroom setting, he typically has four or five students participate in discussions, while the rest of the class remains silent; he remarked that this is not the case for online learning.

Subtheme 3: Testing.

Challis (2005) posited that testing is an essential and key element of assessment practices in online learning. The findings of this study supported this. The participants indicated that they use tests for two separate purposes, to assess learning and assign grades, and to provide students with additional learning experiences. This dual purpose of tests is consistent with the large body of literature on summative and formative learning assessments (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Colburn, 2009; Hagstrom, 2006; and Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

The instructors who indicated they use assessments as a way to provide additional learning experiences allowed the students to take the test more than one time. Wininger (2005) labeled this assessment technique formative summative assessment (FSA). In this way, allowing the students to take tests more than once provides students with feedback on their progress toward learning objectives; and at the same time, enables the instructor to evaluate the students' work.

Theme 2: Changes to Assessments Are Based on Student Feedback

The majority of the participants in this study explained that they change assessment practices as a result of student feedback. The instructors indicated that they change their assessment practices at any point during the semester to meet the students' needs. While this is an area that is under researched in the larger body of literature on online learning, the findings related to this theme are important. The findings support the dynamic nature of assessment outlined by Brookhart (2005). In her assessment theory in college classrooms, Brookhart reasoned that the assessment cycle is dynamic; where instructors plan assessments, then use the results to generate feedback to students, and make subsequent instructional choices and changes.

This theme, changes to assessments are based on student feedback, is significant, because the participants reported that student feedback prompted changes to assessment practices, which indicates that these participants' assessment practices are dynamic as Brookhart (2005) contended. To some extent, however, this finding does not support Brookhart's notion of the assessment cycle. While Brookhart theorized that instructors use assessment results to generate feedback to the students and change instruction and

assessment practices, she did not include student feedback to instructors in this cycle. As a result, this finding suggests a need for additional research and an updated theory which might include the feedback students offer instructors on their assessment practices. This particular finding implies that instructors might be motivated to evaluate their assessment practices based on student feedback as well as assessment results.

Theme 3: Academic Honesty

The theme of academic honesty is recurrent in the large body of literature on online learning. There are generally two differing perspectives; some authors have expressed a concern that cheating is prevalent in online learning (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Fish & Gill, 2009), while others have contended that due to the distant nature of online learning, students are less likely to cheat (Grijalva et al., 2006). Consistent with this literature, the theme of academic honesty emerged in the present research. It was clear from the interviews that academic honesty issues present a significant challenge to assessing online learning. Two subthemes emerged; other people might be completing assigned work and violations of academic honesty might be avoided through various strategies.

The overwhelming majority of participants recognized that academic honesty issues in online learning are a major concern for educators. Several participants indicated that they have talked with their colleagues about the potential for academic dishonesty in online learning, which exemplifies the social construction of knowledge in communities of practice (Biggs, 1996; Laker et al., 2008). The literature indicates that there is concern

among educators, who teach in all learning environments, that online students are more likely to cheat (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Grijalva, Nowell, & Kerkvliet, 2006).

Subtheme 1: Other people might be completing assigned work.

Some participants indicated that violations of academic honesty are a concern, particularly because there is no visual confirmation that the student is actually doing the work in online learning. The participants seemed to believe they are able to more accurately assess that the work is done by the student in a traditional learning setting, since they can actually watch the students work. Those participants also reasoned that the online environment makes cheating easier when compared with the traditional learning environment; all of which is consistent with literature indicating instructors believe that online students are more likely to plagiarize the work of others due to the geographic distance and the large amount of work done online (Grijalva et al., 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009).

Subtheme 2: Violations of academic honesty might be avoided through various strategies.

Challis (2005) argued that online instructors might curb academic dishonesty by utilizing testing services. According to Challis, students should be required to take proctored exams at testing services, where the intent is to reduce, or eliminate cheating on tests. This recommendation of implementing a strategy to discourage academic dishonesty was an idea that also emerged in the present study. The instructors who participated suggested that violations of academic honesty might be avoided through various strategies. Proctored testing was one idea the participants had; in addition, the

instructors suggested plagiarism services, and prolonged engagement on the discussion board as ways to avoid academic dishonesty in the online learning environment.

Noteworthy Observations

Formative assessment and time were two themes present in the large body of literature on online learning, but did not emerge as themes in this study. Outcomes assessments emerged as a horizon for three instructors, all of whom were community college instructors; yet outcomes assessments was not a theme present in current literature on online learning.

Formative Assessment Practices

Based on the literature available on effective instructional practices, formative assessments are invaluable in the learning process (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Formative assessments are used to measure how well students understand the material, with the goal of directing and improving instruction to help the students gain a more meaningful understanding of what was taught (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). In the online learning environment, formative assessment approaches include offering students the opportunity to turn in ungraded drafts of assignments and elicit instructor feedback in the way of column comments; allowing students to take tests more than once and only using the highest grade; and peer review writing activities.

Given the importance of formative assessment, it was noteworthy that the instructors who participated in this study did not focus significant attention on formative assessment practices in their discussions on their assessment practices. Five of the fifteen

instructors indicated they use formative assessment practices, which was surprising, based on the preponderance of literature on formative assessment in higher education. Three instructors discussed instructor feedback on writing assignments, practice quizzes, ungraded discussion board postings, and informal assessment as a means to evaluate and motivate learning. A fourth instructor allows students to take the weekly quizzes up to three times, although the questions change each time. The last instructor who uses formative assessment has the students complete all the discussion posts, but only grades four randomly selected posts.

These formative assessment techniques have been widely accepted as best practices in education (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Nichol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Wiliam & Black, 2004); however formative assessment practices did not emerge as a theme for the present study. While the select group of instructors described formative assessment practices they use, the majority of instructors did not indicate they use formative assessment practices as often as expected, and they did not place the emphasis on formative assessment that one would expect, based on the literature. This finding suggests a need for more research on formative assessment in the online learning environment.

Time

Time is well documented challenge that online instructors face as they assess online learning, and an important issue in the current research on assessment in online learning (Choi & Park, 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009). The research indicates that instructors believe that teaching online is much more time consuming than teaching and assessing

learning in a traditional, face to face classroom (Choi & Park, 2006; Fish & Gill, 2009; Johnson, 2008; see also Lao & Gonzales, 2005). It is significant that in the context of the literature on online learning, time did not emerge as a theme in the present study. Just one participant (P6) identified time as an issue with regard to assessment in online learning.

P6 indicated that online instruction takes more time than face to face teaching. Her main concern, in terms of assessment is that she feels like she is not able to balance her time with the time that assessment and feedback takes. To address this, she has developed grading shortcuts, which has helped her manage the time issue; for example, she grades four of the eight discussion posts, but does not let the students know which four are graded until the end of the semester, so that the students will remain engaged in all the discussions.

Outcomes Assessment

Outcomes assessment is a horizon that emerged for three participants (P7, P8, & P9). According to the participants, Outcomes Assessments are conducted at their colleges, to understand how well the course and associated materials are helping students meet the established learning objectives for their courses. The community college instructors explained that they believe the college administration should require standards for quality of instruction, though they are worried about what it means in terms of their course construction; the instructors are concerned that the standards will interfere with their academic freedom and instruction and assessment practices. While this was not an expected finding, it is striking, since all three participants are from community colleges.

This is notable, because no instructor from the 4 year college and universities mentioned Outcomes Assessments or a similar type program.

Implications for Social Change

The advent and massive growth of online learning has generated a need for educators to understand current practices in this innovative learning environment. Research indicates that assessment is a critical aspect of learning, and vital element of online instruction (Johnson, 2008; Vonderwell et al., 2007). The implication is that improved assessment practices will provide students with a better learning experience. Despite the importance of high quality assessment practices, there is a gap in the literature on assessment in online learning (Arend, 2008; Beebe et al., 2010; Boerema et al., 2007). As a result, this study was designed to contribute a rich understanding of the assessment practices of online social science instructors; in an effort to inform interested parties, and contribute positively to the advancement of best practices in online education. Together, the present study informs instructors about assessment practices of online instructors, promotes the development of effective online instructors, and improves the educational experiences of present and future students taking online courses; all of which promotes positive social change, because instructors who are more effective as instructors will be more invested in their work, and students who are more prepared to serve in their profession will be more successful.

The present study promotes positive social change for several groups of people; the participants in this study, other online instructors, and students taking online course. This study has afforded the participants the opportunity to consider their own assessment

practices, through the interview process. Several instructors indicated that they had forgotten about various activities and self checks that they believe are important. The participants appreciated the value of the interview experience, because the experience gave them an opportunity to reevaluate their own assessment practices, as well as think about ways they might improve their current assessment practices. Further, the interviews provided these instructors the opportunity to engage in a community of practice and exchange of ideas. As a result, the present study might improve the participants' experiences with assessment in online instruction.

This study might also positively transform the experiences of other online instructors, by offering them a clear representation of assessment practices being used by the 15 participants. Due to the size and scope of online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2008), improved instruction is meritorious for online instructors. Instructors, who are well informed concerning current assessment practices of other online instructors, might be prompted to reflect on their own practices and evaluate their approaches to assessment in the online learning environment. New and inexperienced instructors might grow to be well informed about the nuances of assessment of online learning and more prepared to offer high quality instruction. As instructors learn more about teaching online, they might feel more competent and have a positive view of their experiences.

Effective assessment practices inform students and instructors regarding how well students are learning (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Kinne & Eastep, 2008; Johnson, 2008; & Reeves, 2006); motivates learners (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009); and promotes active learning (Dengler, 2008; Phillips, 2005). The outcome of improved instruction is a better

learning experience for online students; therefore, the present study will contribute to an improved educational experience for online learners and positively influence their future educational and professional experiences. Improved learning experiences will offer students positive feelings about their learning experiences and at the same time; better prepare these learners for their future professional roles.

Recommendations for Action

This study was designed to understand and depict the experiences of online instructors regarding their assessment practices in online learning. The present research will be disseminated in publication form to educators and other interested parties, in an effort to inform those people and positively influence the development of best practices in online learning. The audience will be considered as the findings are disseminated. Teachers might be more interested in the practical applications of the material, whereas administrators might be more interested in the theoretical implications of the findings.

The findings of this study indicated that instructors develop their assessment practices in the context of their professional relationships, as well as their previous experiences. As a result, it is imperative that instructors are informed about recent and innovative assessment strategies in online learning. To accomplish this, new and returning instructors should be periodically trained in best practices for assessing online learning. This type of training is essential to the professional development of online instructors, across all disciplines in the social sciences. To supplement training offered to online instructors, it is essential that colleges and universities that offer online courses and online programs provide support for online instructors; via webinars, workshops,

instructional materials, and consultation with experienced instructors. The development of mentoring programs will also provide ongoing support to new and less experienced online instructors. Colleges and universities also need to develop core curriculum courses for teacher preparation programs that are specifically constructed to prepare preservice instructors to design the assessments for online courses, and assess and evaluate learning in the online environment.

The present findings also indicated that academic honesty was a concern for instructors who teach online. The participants indicated that violations of academic honesty might be avoided through various strategies, such as proctored exams, prolonged engagement, and plagiarism services. The implication is that all colleges and universities that offer online courses must support teachers in their efforts to reduce or eliminate the incidences of academic dishonesty. Several participants indicated that the university or college did not have resources in place to support these strategies. It is important that online teachers are encouraged to promote academic honesty in students in all learning environments, including online. Financial and organizational resources must be directed to accomplish this.

Recommendations for Further Study

This research has spawned a wide variety of future research ideas. Some ideas for further study emerged as a result of the limitations of the present research, whereas others materialized as a result of the emergent themes from the present study. Since its inception, online learning has had significant growth. This study was limited to 15 undergraduate social science instructors who teach online for public colleges or

universities. Online learning has been expanded since its inception to include children from Kindergarten through secondary school. As of 2010, 39 states held state run education initiatives or state led virtual schools (Watson et al., 2010). And, Allen and Seaman (2009) found that 14% of online students at the post secondary level are taking graduate courses, therefore the assessment practices of instructors who teach graduate students are important to understand. Future research needs to address assessment practices of instructors who teach elementary, middle, high school; and graduate students will contribute to the collective understanding of assessment practices in online learning.

In addition to research on the assessment practices of instructors who teach online courses for students from Kindergarten through 12th grades, and graduate students, research that investigates assessment practices of instructors who teach content areas other than social sciences may be valuable. This study was focused on the assessment of online learning in social sciences; however, each content area is unique and assessment practices might differ by content area. Where social science instructors use writing assignments and asynchronous discussions, mathematic instructors might use other types of assignments that are more suited to the content being taught and learned. As a result, further research will need to be done to understand the experiences and assessment practices of online instructors who teach in other content areas.

A richer understanding of academic honesty in online learning is needed. More specifically, issues surrounding violations of academic honesty are important to understand as online learning becomes more commonplace. It would be helpful for instructors and policy makers gain a more complete description of issues pertaining to

academic honesty issues, particularly as technology is advanced. There are conflicting views of academic honesty issues in online learning, and getting a clearer picture will help educators improve the quality of online learning, in addition to the perceived quality of online learning.

Additional research is also needed to understand how online instructors change their assessment practices over time. The present study's findings indicated that instructors change assessments based on student feedback, during and after the semester. An exhaustive critical literature review did not reveal studies relating to this aspect of assessment in online learning; therefore a gap might exist. Further research is needed to understand how instructors change assessment practices, and specifically why student feedback prompts instructors to do so.

The findings of this study did not support some themes in the literature regarding online learning. Contrary to what was expected, time, access, and quality were not themes which emerged as a result of this study; therefore additional research is needed concerning time and quality. Overall, this study provided a rich understanding of some aspects of online instructors' assessment practices, regarding the actual assessments used, changes to assessments based on student feedback, and academic honesty. Further research is needed and will benefit online instructors and learners, as well as other interested parties.

Researcher Reflections

As an online student for 6 years and a teacher, I am intimately connected to my topic. Through my educational and professional experiences, I have learned about course

construction for online learning, and spent time developing my personal philosophy of education. As a result, I was concerned at the beginning of this process that I would not be able to clearly and impartially conduct interviews or interpret the data. To help reduce the bias and preconceived ideas, I listed all my previous assessment experiences. I wrote out my thoughts on the types of assessments I thought were valuable and those I believe are not useful in online learning. I spent time thinking about how my previous experiences with assessment in online learning might color how I interpreted the data. After each interview, I spent time reflecting on how I interacted with the participant, thinking of ways I might have curtailed a discussion or areas where I spent more time asking follow up questions than I might have otherwise. I believe these actions helped allay some of my concerns.

This experience has been valuable. I have gained insight into the process of assessing online learning. In thinking back on my interviews, two instructors shared practical suggestions they have found effective. One instructor explained that she constructs groups for group projects by observing when students turn their work in, then grouping like minded students; the instructor explained that she puts people together, based on their internal sense of time. After reflecting on my online group experiences, this might have made a big difference for me as a student. If I utilize groups in my online instruction, I will include this strategy as I construct the groups.

The other instructor offered a suggestion for an assignment. She periodically has students grade their own work by using the course rubric. The students are expected to write an evaluation and assign points to their own work. The project is reflective and

constructive. These two practical ideas of things that can be done in to assess online learning have changed how I think about teaching in this learning environment. These instructors have clearly spent the additional time thinking of innovative ways to improve their students learning experience. The participants in this study have molded how I understand instruction and assessment in the online learning environment and for this, I am grateful.

Summary

The present phenomenological study was designed to understand the assessment practices of online instructors who teach in the online learning environment. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 15 social science instructors, who shared their experiences with assessment in the online learning environment. The instructors who participated in this study use a range of assessment practices to assess online learning. The specific combination of assessment practices emerges in the context of previous teaching experiences and professional relationships, which served to reaffirm the social construction of knowledge in communities of practice. Online instructors also change instruction based on the students' feedback, lending support for the dynamic nature of assessment that was outlined by Brookhart (2005) in her assessment theory in the college classroom. Academic honesty was the most prominent concern the instructors shared. The present study has contributed to the field wide understanding of the assessment practices of these instructors. With the emergence and massive growth of online learning, and because assessment serves to drive instruction (Wiliam & Black,

1998), understanding the assessment practices of online instructors is beneficial to the students taking those classes.

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Appendix A: Letter of Informed Consent

June 28, 2010

Dear (Participant),

You are invited to take part in a phenomenological research study of the experiences of online undergraduate instructors who teach psychology, regarding their learning assessments. You were chosen for the study because you are an instructor for an undergraduate psychology course that is conducted online. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Cynthia S. Dietrich, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:
The purpose of the present phenomenological study will be to describe the experiences of psychology instructors who teach online, regarding assessments that are used to evaluate leaning outcomes in an online learning environment. In addition, the researcher aims to understand the challenges and benefits of assessing learning in an online classroom.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview, which will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview will take roughly an hour to complete. The interview will be conducted at your convenience and will take place either over the phone or in person.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. This means that everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you want to be in the study. No one at Walden University or your institution will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during the study. If you feel stressed during the study you might stop at any time. You might skip any questions that you feel are too personal.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
There are no potential physical or emotional risks involved with the present study. Participants will be contributing their expertise for the betterment of online education. By doing so, the participants will be contributing their experiences to clarify our present,

collective understanding of the phenomenon known as online education. There is no potential conflict of interest in the present research.

Compensation:
There is no monetary or gift compensation for the present research study.

Confidentiality:
Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in any reports of the study. All data will be kept securely for a period of 5 years from the completion of the study.

Contacts and Questions:
You might ask any questions you have now. A copy of this form will be provided to you. If you have questions later, you might contact the researcher via email at cynthia.dietrich@waldenu.edu, or by cell phone at 609/675-6946. Walden University's approval number for this study is **11-10-10-0360845** and it expires on **November 9, 2011.**

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant _____

Date of consent _____

Participant's Signature _____

Researcher's Written Signature _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions for Data Collection

1. I am interested in learning more about how you assess student learning in the online learning environment, from early course conception through the completion of the course. Can you walk me through your process of assessing student learning in the online courses you teach?
2. What types of learning assessments do you use in the online classes that you teach?
3. How often do you assess student learning throughout an online course?
4. How do you determine how effectively the assessments you use evaluate your students' learning?
5. How do your assessment practices in the online courses you teach compare with those you use in any f2f courses you teach?
6. During an online course, how do you, if at all, change instruction based on your students' results?
7. How does the online classroom environment make the assessment of learning challenging?
8. What concerns do you have about assessing online learning?
9. What university policies influence your assessment practices? How do these policies influence your assessment practices in your online courses?
10. Describe how you administer learning assessments online.
11. Describe how you use your students' learning assessment results.

12. Is there anything else you want to try in terms of assessment, but you haven't for one reason or another?
13. Do your students evaluate their learning experience? And, if so, is there any feedback specifically pertaining to assessments or your assessment practices that might be interesting to note? Are there things your students like or do not like?
14. When you first started teaching online, how did you figure out how to do it?
15. If I wanted to develop and introductory social science course, what else should I consider in designing the learning assessments for that course?

Appendix C: Horizon Examples

Horizon (Participant Code)	Theme	Subtheme
I have academic freedom to construct courses (P1) I assess learning in many ways (P8)	Online Instructors Use a Combination of Assessment Practices	
How groups are formed (P14) Group work is essential in the modern workplace (P13)		Assignments
Discussions engage learners (P2) Discussions are a valuable part of online learning (P9)		Discussion
Exams are an effective assessment point (P3) Quizzes are a way for students to learn material (P15)		Testing
Student feedback concerning issues in class Student complaints (P2) Student feedback at the end of the class (P7)	Changes to assessments from student feedback	
Proctored exams (P5) Cheating is easier in online learning (P6)	Academic Honesty	
I worry someone at home is doing the work (P2) Plagiarism (P2)		Other people might be completing assigned work
Assignments based on personal experiences to reducing cheating (P8) The students voices are recognizable online, so plagiarism is more easily detectable online (P6)		Violations of academic honesty can be avoided through various strategies

Appendix D: Researcher Response Log Entry

Researcher Reflections

This was a great experience. For the entire evening before this interview, I was feeling really nervous. I read and reread the questions, made sure my recorder was working and thought about potential issues that might arise (like an internet connection problem). The participant understood my questions so clearly. It was like we were on the same wavelength. Though he teaches and resides in a nearby city, he preferred to have our meeting over the phone. I am wondering if this is going to be the case for many instructors. I wonder what this says. Overall, I really enjoyed talking with this participant. His area of instruction is not psychology, so it was interesting.

After this interview, I added 2 questions, which I have indicated on the questions document. These seemed important to add as they might elicit interesting data about instructors' experiences with assessment as they teach online. Glad to have talked with this participant.

Appendix E: Member Checking Letter

April 2, 2011

Dear (Participant),

Thank you for speaking with me and sharing your experiences as an online social science instructor. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal experiences with assessment in this learning environment. I would like to send my copy of your transcript for your review. Is it acceptable for me to send this document electronically? If not, please let me know and I will send a copy via USPS. I plan to send them out late next week, so if I do not hear from you by then, I will presume it is acceptable to send the transcript electronically.

Once you receive the document, would you please review the entire document? Be sure to ask yourself if this interview has fully captured your experience teaching and assessing online learning. After reviewing the transcript of the interview, you might realize that an important experience was neglected. Please feel free to add comments in the right column of the transcript that would further elaborate your experience(s). Please do not edit for grammatical corrections, unless for some reason the meaning has been distorted.

When you have reviewed the transcript and have had an opportunity to make changes and additions, please e-mail the corrected transcript back to me at cindydietrich@comcast.net. If I do not hear from you after 5 days, I will assume you are satisfied with the transcript. I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your experiences. Your contribution has been invaluable. If you have questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me by e-mail or cell phone at 609/675-6946. I hope your experience contributing to this study was a pleasant one.

With warm regards,

Cindy Dietrich
Walden University
609/675-6946

Appendix F: Sample Transcript

R: Can you share with me what courses you teach online or your background teaching online?

P6: I have taught some online courses at a technical college, years ago, kind of when it was first starting to become big news, in 2005-6-7. That's when I first took a class in online instruction. In about 2007, I started teaching social stratification. I am actually a full time research scientist at [redacted]. And I started teaching social stratification before I even came to [redacted] online at [redacted]. And I still teach it there. I have been teaching it every fall, and some springs ever since I started. My other experience with it is kind of back door. As a graduate student at [redacted] when I was finishing my phD in education at the time, I served on the [redacted] curriculum committee and I was the student rep. and in that role because I was already teaching an online course and I was finishing my phd in education, I kind of ended up being the online representative for the curriculum committee. So if anyone had questions, "How would you do this, T. in an online environment?" So, I ended up being that go to person for that kind of information. So I have a little bit more awareness of the kinds of online instruction than I actually have performed. The online instruction I did at the technical college was very formulaic. I have no other ability other than to give some feedback via email around writing samples, so the majority of it was almost self lead and I really didn't find it to be effective in long term retention of knowledge.

R: Sure. Sort of like a correspondence course, if you will.

P6: Yeah it was very much like that. It was kind of – one of the things I felt like I learned from that experience is that I did not want to teach a course that really anyone sitting in a living room could answer the questions and because I want to be sure I am addressing the actual students that signed up for the course and I want to give the grade to **that** student, you know? One of the things that people struggled with on the curriculum committee, especially some of the **older** people that had been teaching for many, many years, there was this belief that the only reason people took online classes is because they are just trying to cheat the system. You didn't really do it because you wanted to learn or because you couldn't just get to a traditional course environment, you just did it because you couldn't do it on your own and you needed help from your mom, your uncle, or the person sitting there- you needed help.

R: I think I got an email from that person— laughter

P6: Which is so funny—one of the things I had to really educate people on the curriculum committee was that isn't the reality. Yeah—might be there are lazy instructors here and there, but we also know who those people are in the classroom. They are the same one that let their GA's really who teach the classes and they get the credit and they have the GA's do all the follow up and hold the office hours. Now, they are really not like

teaching the classes anyway, and it's those same people who do that stuff online. The people who really care about education and instruction, they're not going to do that online, so I think it really comes down to oversight and I think the oversight is the hard part. The problem is that if you tell an online faculty member that they are going to have less autonomy than someone that is in an on sight program, than that's not right either. And so, I don't know—it's kind of a catch 22. We have sort of set ourselves up in higher education to not look over other people's shoulders.

R: Sure. At all levels of education—it's the shutting the door mentality.

P6: There needs to be autonomy but there also needs to be that level of support, especially with very young instructors or instructors that have a proven track record of trying to take the easy way out. There needs to be some accountability. The only accountability we really have is things like "Yes, you have to give a final exam, because students are paying for 16 weeks of instruction not 15 weeks". We set up policies to try and enforce some of this stuff but I am not sure if it does any good.

R: What kinds of learning assessments do you use in the online classroom?

P6: I really don't use quizzes or tests, I primarily use written stuff and the method I have determined for the class I teach, because it's more of a seminar class-- I really require individual engagement. So, I have developed rubrics for writing samples and they know ahead of time what's an A, what's a B, what's a C and what they have to do to attain that level of grade. And, I actually grade them on grammar every time. I think it's a unique environment to see writing samples constantly from people and its nice to see their writing improve throughout the semester. I basically set it up like any other class, but I basically use writing and rubrics for all my grading.

R: Ok. How do you determine how effectively those things evaluate the students' learning?

P6: You know, I think the first semester I did it, I wasn't sure. Honestly, I don't know that other than my intuition and having an educational background, and checking and rechecking my rubrics, you know to make sure my pedagogy was targeted to what my objectives were—you know, obviously I asked questions that relate back to the content and I force them to pull the content back into their writing. And they get graded on whether they are able to do that or not. Gosh—I wish there were a quick and easy way to say it. 2 things I look for to make sure I know they are learning. 1. Do their attitudes change from the beginning of the class to the end? Because I teach social stratification, I –the beginning of the semester I have them all do introductions. And their introductions usually entail them doing something about why they are so enlightened on this subject already. And typically, people take social stratification because they already care strongly about strata and they work really hard in their personal lives to make sure strata doesn't hold people back that they're close to and things like this. As they learn about all of the

facets of strata, toward the end of the semester, they get really humble. And that humility to me is the measure of whether I have been successful in raising their awareness of strata. That seems really simplistic, and I don't actually measure that, but if people were not humble by the end of the class and they were getting A's, then I would think there were some things wrong with my grade. But if they are really humble and I think they really got it, and their grades were low, that might be a reflection of the online system. You kind of set yourself up with online that you have to award some credit for participation. So because just showing up is just giving them some kind of credit, there's always that possibility they could pass and not have learned a lot. But I think that's true of any class.

R: I don't think that's simplistic at all.

P6: Well, intuitively, I know once they get it, their attitudes change, like they're suddenly more respectful of their colleagues in the class, they stop doing the quick comebacks and they start really being more inquisitive and they start asking questions, rather then telling everybody how it should be. You just see growth from the beginning of the class to the end.

R: How do your assessment practices in online classes compare with your assessment practices in the f2f classroom?

P6: That's a tough one for me, because I have never taught social stratification in the f2f classroom. I have taught seminars, however, in f2f classrooms and I have tried to use the same assessment tools in the f2f seminar class that I use online, and they seem less effective in the f2f. And I am not sure why that is. I actually get more frustrated now—I would consider myself pretty good at online instruction, relative to some of the other people I have talked to who are just like "I am not sure how to handle…" You know? I almost think I am better in online instruction than I am in f2f instruction yet one of my degree areas is communications, so I have pretty good skills in the classroom, but I struggle with seminars, where I really want to be able to assess everybody on their knowledge level and their participation and their engagement and yet how do you engage 13-15 people when you have an hour and a half to do that? Where in an online setting, everyone is forced to be engaged. So I really get to communicate with every single person. I get to communicate with them one on one, they get to communicate with the group, as a whole. I mean, part of how I establish the class is that I require that they read someone's dialogue and respond to it once a week, and they respond to my questions on a weekly basis. So there is constant dialogue going on the site and it's just like an open discussion board. Questions related to the readings and the websites that we look at or articles that I have found or other people have posted. So those questions create the dialogue and in a classroom where people always have to show up at a particular time, I think they do not always come mentally prepared, whereas when they are in an online environment, they are there at a time that is best for them and so they **are** mentally prepared. So they come at a time that is best for them "okay, this is my time now and I

am going to do it" and so they come to it more prepared. And if they are not prepared, they can go away, prepare themselves more and then come back, whereas in a classroom environment, if they are not prepared, they just lost a week. And you really—there's not getting that back and so I really think that and I say this tongue in cheek, because I actually think I would not be a good online student personally --I am not saying online instruction is right for everybody and that we should go to it across the board, right? But I do think that there are really good ways to engage those people who its [online learning] right for, but I don't think we're always doing that. But I think it can be done, and when it is done well, it's actually better…

Curriculum Vitae

CYNTHIA S. DIETRICH, MS
235 Tyler Road
Dennisville, New Jersey 08270-9302

EDUCATION

Walden University
Doctoral in Educational Psychology
Expected Date of Completion August 2011
Masters in General Psychology, 2009

University of Maryland University College
BS in Psychology, 2007

Northeastern University
BS in Elementary Education, 1993

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Cape May Par 3 & Driving Range
Marketing Representative
Rio Grande, New Jersey 2009- Present

Developed and maintain an internet and social media marketing plan, incorporating principles of Search Engine Optimization (SEO). Increased web presence and improved customer use of the website by 40% through various internet marketing strategies, including GOOGLE ads, free advertising, social media marketing, and applying the principles of SEO

Make-A-Wish Foundation of New Jersey
Event Chairperson
1999- Present

Created and maintain an active localized presence for the Make-A-Wish Foundation of New Jersey. Recruit, orient and supervise local volunteers under the guidance of the Director of Volunteer Services for the Make-A-Wish Foundation. Assist with and

coordinate the granting of wishes for children living with life threatening illnesses. Coordinate and supervise significant annual fund raising event, which has raised $450k to fund local wishes. Conduct monthly informational meetings for volunteers associated with Make-A-Wish Weekend in Cape Might County. Participate in community outreach events. Design and maintain website that supports Weekend in Cape Might County events.

Dennis Township Board of Education
Latch Key Coordinator
2000-2003

Coordinated and managed the record keeping of the after school program. Created and maintained a computerized database to efficiently coordinate the program. Communicated with parents and guardians concerning all aspects of the program. Submitted monthly financial reports and made program recommendations to the Board of Education. Coordinated and scheduled staffing for the program.

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Dennis Township School District
Resource Room Teacher
2001/2002-2002/2003

Prepared lesson plans. Implemented a variety of student centered teaching approaches to meet student learning needs, to maximize student weaknesses and take advantage of student strengths. Provided remedial instruction for students with learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, and psychological disorders. Provided individualized instruction. Collaborated with parents and school professionals to ensure appropriate placements for students. Developed classroom management techniques. Identified student academic and social needs and implemented strategies to meet them. Maintained accurate student records.

RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

Student Researcher **September 2010 - January 2011**
Walden University

Collaborated with Drs. Lee Ann Stadtlander, Martha Giles, and Amy Sickel at Walden University. Recruited and interviewed 8 individuals, one in each decade of the lifespan from 20s through 90s, using a new sampling technique. Participated in virtual meetings, using SKYPE, to review techniques and relevant literature.

PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

American Psychological Association, current member
National Association for the Education of Young Children, past member

SCHOLASTIC ACHIEVEMENTS AND AWARDS

University of Maryland University College, Summa Cum Laude, 2007
University of Maryland University College, Dean's List
Golden Key National Honor Society, Northeastern University
Phi Kappa Phi, Kappa Zeta Chapter, Northeastern University
Kappa Delta Pi, International Honor Society in Education, Northeastern University
Northeastern University, Summa Cum Laude June 1993
Northeastern University, Middler Year Writing Award June 1991

SPECIAL TRAINING AND EDUCATION

SEO: The Art of Search Engine Optimization
EIRC Professional Development Division, "Raising Emotional Intelligence with ACTIONS"
Bureau of Education and Research, "Engaging Your Preschool Learners"
Dennis Township School District, "Special Education Law, Walking in their Shoes"