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Educational Experiences of Traditional and Online Learning Graduate Students

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MS, Walden University 2021

BS, Troy University, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended both traditional and online courses describe their educational experiences, particularly in terms of engagement, knowledge application, and peer connections. Semistructured interviews were conducted among 12 graduate-level, human services students who had experience in both learning environments. Social learning theory was the theoretical foundation used in the study. Thematic analysis, revealed four major themes describing distinct learning experiences across modalities. First, online and traditional learning involve different forms of engagement. Second, relational engagement in academic environments is important. Third, constraints on engagement across learning environment occur in both. Fourth, there are complementary strengths of online and traditional learning. Both environments presented unique constraints: online learning involved isolation and communication challenges, while traditional learning created rigid scheduling and classroom exposure issues. However, each modality offered complementary strengths, with online learning providing flexibility and personal growth opportunities, while traditional learning offered structure, accountability, and interpersonal skill development essential for human services work. The findings provide insights for educators and institutions designing effective learning environments and address gaps in literature regarding graduate-level human services students' comparative experiences.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my deceased parents, Fred, and Lizzie Crawford; my deceased husband, Artis Williams; my deceased son Anthony Quatez Williams; and my deceased brothers Fred Crawford Jr. and Terry Crawford ; and my deceased nephew Wharton “Chris” Murray.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my entire family for believing in me and encouraging me. To my girls, Ashley Williams, Artisha Williams, and Karri Williams, thank you for being my motivation and inspiration. Thank you for never letting me quit. To my grandchildren, Zy'Kerria, Jaylen, Zamarious, and Amarion, I pray this will encourage you to want to reach goals that you thought were unreachable. To my dear friends, Keesha Shepherd, thank you for always listening to my complaints when no one else would, and Enjolique Walters, thank you for all your guidance throughout this process. I could not have reached this goal without you. To my sisters, Maxine, Della, and Susan, thank you for your many prayers. To my brothers, Willie, Alfred, Robert, Mark, Anthony, and Eric thank you in advance for bragging about your little sister and always supporting me. Dr. Cara Marie Manlandro, thank you for being the best editor anyone could ask for, and thank you for your patience. Bullock County School District thank you for an opportunity to be a part of the best education system in the state of Alabama. If I were not teaching during COVID, I probably would have never chosen my topic. To the best chair in history Dr.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Before the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic, online learning was an optional alternative. Research indicates that there is still significant progress to be made in achieving equitable and engaging online learning for all students (Kelly & Zakrajsek, 2023; Tate & Warschauer, 2022). However, instructors successfully adapted to emergency remote teaching (ERT) to guarantee that courses maintained the same educational outcomes (Weidlich & Kalz, 2021). The abrupt implementation of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic hindered instructors and institutions from conducting thorough studies and endorsing the most captivating online learning tools (Hollister et al., 2022). Online learning was solidified as a mechanism of education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, educational leaders at all levels needed to find novel ways of educating students. Social distancing, government shutdowns, and educational institution closures threatened students' education at the primary, secondary, and college levels (Tan, 2021). The capacity of modern technology has been enhanced, enhancing the education of students through online learning (Heng & Sol, 2021). Some parents believed their children were not receiving an adequate education through online learning (Garbe et al., 2020). Conversely, other parents and students in higher education enjoyed online learning and found it effective (Weldon et al., 2021). However, a lingering question is how online learning compares to attending traditional classes in a classroom.

The capacity of online learning was tested during the COVID-19 pandemic. During the Spring of 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic led to the cancellation of in-person instruction in 90% of higher education institutions in the United States; these institutions instead used ERT methods (Lederman, 2020). The ERT implemented due to COVID-19 differs significantly from regular online learning (Stewart et al., 2022) In ERT, students could not choose whether to participate, and teachers were required to quickly transition to online teaching, which was not feasible within the given timeframe (Hodges et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). Conversely, in traditional online learning, students choose to learn online rather than in a traditional classroom setting (Hodges et al., 2020).

The efficacy of online learning is still unclear. Indeed, the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning have been a topic of considerable debate (Illarionova et al., 2021). Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the concept of distance learning has recently become an increasingly urgent issue (Lederman, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that most higher education institutions transition to hybrid or distance learning (Bashir et al., 2021). The shift to online learning has altered the balance of traditionally co-located educational and living spaces (Caro-Barek et al., 2023). Variations in the quality of educational instructions, unequal access to the necessary technologies for distance learning, and students' technological competence are all challenges identified in prior research about remote learning (Ferri et al., 2020). Researchers in various fields have shown that well-structured online learning can increase student motivation, satisfaction, and learning outcomes (Gaffas, 2023; Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). Zheng et al. (2021) analyzed studies comparing online and face-to-

face versions of the same course from 1996 to 2008, finding that online learning can produce results equal to or superior to face-to-face learning. Thus, there is considerable uncertainty regarding the efficacy of online learning.

It is unclear whether traditional in-person learning is superior to online learning. Some scholars argue that online learning is more efficacious than traditional classroom learning (Zheng et al., 2021), whereas other scholars indicate that traditional learning produces better educational outcomes than online learning (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Some scholars believe online learning will soon be considered a main option for educating students (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2023). Technology is constantly being enhanced, and online learning may help mitigate the ongoing teacher shortage (Dwinal, 2015). In this study, students' perceptions regarding the efficacy of online and traditional in-person learning will be explored.

In Chapter 1, I present the background of the study and the study's problem, purpose, and research question. The theoretical framework for the study, social learning theory, is presented and discussed. Next, I describe the nature of the study and operationalize critical terms required to understand the study. I also discuss the study's assumptions, scope, and delimitations, and limitations. The chapter closes with a transition to Chapter 2.

Background

In this study, I compared students' perceptions of traditional and online learning. Traditional learning refers to an environment where a teacher interacts with students in a conventional classroom (Papaioannou et al., 2023). Students attend the class for a

predetermined amount of time, during which they gain knowledge on a variety of topics and disciplines, and they frequently gain practical experience that may be used in building a career (Ciarocco, 2018). Some students perceive traditional learning as an active strategy involving the chalk-and-board technique, practical sessions, and interactive sessions, which they believe is most efficacious for their learning (Vyas, 2022). Some students prefer traditional learning to other learning modalities.

Online learning is significantly different than traditional in-person learning. Online learning is an educational approach where students and teachers are physically separated, and the entirety of the educational process takes place through the utilization of the Internet and communication networks (Alzahrani, 2022). In 2010, 6.1 million students were registered in one or more online courses, accounting for approximately 31% of the population of higher education students (Kumari et al., 2021). During the Spring of 2020, 90% of higher education institutions within the United States suspended in-person instructional activities and transitioned to ERT in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Lederman, 2020). Students were forced to learn online rather than in traditional classroom settings.

I examined how human services students describe their experiences with in-person and online learning. Human services professionals assist individuals and communities in functioning as effectively as possible (Mosley et al., 2020). Human services education focuses largely on personal client interaction, traditionally necessitating in-person learning (Keeney et al., 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, practice-based learning was shifted online for human services students, removing

interpersonal interactions from the curriculum. Nasseri et al. (2023) explored students' perceptions of virtual clinical-case learning, finding that students preferred online clinical learning over in-person practical training. Conversely, Curran et al. (2020) found that human services students preferred in-person learning to online learning. Therefore, it is presently unclear whether human services students prefer in-person or online learning. Consequently, human services students' perceptions regarding the shift to online learning will be explored in this study.

Problem Statement

Online learning has apparent benefits and drawbacks. In a representative sample of 1,008 undergraduate students who commenced their Spring 2020 classes in a traditional classroom setting and subsequently transitioned to online learning, 51% of participants expressed a high level of satisfaction with their courses prior to the onset of the pandemic (Hollister et al., 2022). However, following the shift to online instruction, just 19% of students reported being very satisfied with their educational experience (Means & Neisler, 2021). A significant proportion of students indicated a decline in their level of participation and attendance during live lectures, with 72% of respondents expressing that insufficient engagement during lectures negatively impacted their online learning experience (Means & Neisler, 2021). Many students expressed difficulties in maintaining connections with their peers and professors and regulating the speed of their assignments (Hollister et al., 2022). Contemporary educational courses are no longer confined solely to the conventional in-person format but are now delivered through alternative methods, including distance education (Tzirides et al., 2023). Educational

learning must be aware of students' perceptions of online learning to ensure a productive educational environment.

There is a growing prevalence of online education among college students in the United States. Approximately 32% of college students, comprising 6.7 million individuals, are currently enrolled in at least one online course (Nordyke, 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that students learn mathematics more effectively when actively engaging with an instructor in a conventional, face-to-face classroom setting (Lin, 2022). However, when the opportunity to teach through fully online classes is provided, students can successfully acquire knowledge in the field of statistics, regardless of whether they are enrolled in a traditional face-to-face classroom or an online learning experience (Lin, 2022). The problem is that online education is growing in enrollment across institutional types (Welding, 2023), but engagement in the classroom has been shown to be less effective in some studies (Cole et al., 2021). It is important to understand the experiences of online learners, especially those who have experience with both types of learning.

Although the aforementioned research on traditional and online learning of graduate-level students illuminates important findings, there is a dearth of literature exploring students' experiences, including both in-person and online learning, or specific to graduate-level human services students. Given this, further research is warranted that could explore and understand the experiences of students who have had experiences with both types of learning. Many students expressed difficulties in maintaining connections with their peers and professors, as well as regulating the speed of their assignments

(Hollister et al., 2022), but truly understanding from the experiences of individuals who have operated in both environments will further research in this area.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers. This study's participants described the differences between traditional classroom education and online learning experiences through semistructured interviews. The focus on the graduate level only was intended to ensure that participants have educational experiences and maturity in terms of content learning and age and can speak to differences in their educational process (see Tufford et al., 2024).

Research Question

One research question was devised to address the purpose of this study:

RQ1: How do graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The theory that grounds this study was Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory. Social learning theory focuses on attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation (Rumjaun & Narod, 2020). I explored whether online learning is comparable

to traditional classroom learning for graduate human services students. According to Bandura's social learning theory, observation and modeling significantly influence human learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Bandura's thesis extends beyond the notion that learning alone arises from direct interactions with the environment; social learning refers to the dynamic process by which individuals exchange and cultivate knowledge, encompassing skills and experiences, through interpersonal interactions (Bandura, 1982; Bandura & Walters, 1977). Using social learning theory as a theoretical lens should provide a foundation for understanding the dynamic nature of traditional and online learning.

Social learning theory is applicable to understanding traditional and online learning. Online learning limits students' direct observation of their professors and interpersonal interactions, which may limit students' ability to model professors' behavior (Nouraey & Al-Badi, 2023). However, traditional learning allows teachers to facilitate interactions with and between students (Sun & Wu, 2016). It is unclear whether online learning provides students with the dynamic environment necessary for practice-based learning (Al Mamun & Lawrie, 2023). Social learning theory allowed for an understanding of how graduate-level human services students describe their educational experiences concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers in traditional and online courses.

Nature of the Study

The phenomenon under investigation in this study was how graduate human services students describe their experiences with traditional and online learning. I used a

qualitative methodology with a generic qualitative research design. A qualitative design was selected because it allows researchers to provide rich and in-depth explanations of the experiences of individuals who have interacted with or been impacted by a phenomenon (see Huntington-Klein, 2021), such as online and traditional learning platforms in higher education. Qualitative research is beneficial when little is known about a particular topic and a need exists to construct new knowledge by documenting participant experiences, perceptions, and beliefs (Mello, 2021). The quantitative design was not chosen for this research because the quantitative methodology involves reducing phenomena into numerical representations for comparison or evaluating the impact of certain variables on other variables (Leavy, 2022). My aim was to explore in-depth participants' experiences with online and traditional learning rather than determining the magnitude to which variables associated with learning modality interact with one another. Thus, a qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate and optimal for this proposed study.

A generic qualitative research design was selected for the study because I intended to explore students' experiences with online and traditional learning. Generic qualitative research involves the in-depth exploration and description of the perceptions and experiences that individuals have with a particular phenomenon, with the aim of documenting the existence and nature of those experiences (Percy et al., 2015). This type of methodology is ideal when the boundaries of a phenomenon have been defined, there is a lack of in-depth research into the phenomenon, and there is a need to document and describe its presence (Percy et al., 2015), such as attitudes students in higher education

hold regarding online learning. Alternative qualitative methodologies, such as phenomenology, case study, and ethnography, were considered but ultimately determined to be less than ideal due to the aim of describing the perceptions of graduate human services students regarding traditional and online education. A case study design involves examining different aspects of a phenomenon within one organizational context (Yin, 2018). My aim of this study was to explore the perspectives of graduate students from multiple universities rather than a single university or department; this rendered the case study design inappropriate for the proposed studies. Ethnography involves exploring individuals' behavior and culture within their natural setting or context (Clifford & Marcus, 2023). Ethnography was not appropriate for this study, as the purpose was not to observe participants' behavior in their natural settings. Thus, alternative methodologies are each beneficial for distinct purposes but are limited in their depth and richness in describing and capturing the full body of experiences individuals have with a phenomenon like online education (Cardano, 2020). Thus, a generic qualitative research design was determined to be ideal for the specific aims and objectives of this study.

Data was collected through semistructured interviews with human services graduate students who have participated in traditional and online learning. Semistructured interviews are useful in qualitative research for exploring complex phenomena in-depth (Belina, 2023). Through semistructured interviews, I explored how the participants describe their educational experiences in traditional and online learning environments concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers. Data were collected through audio-recorded, virtual interviews and transcribed

using commercially available audio-to-transcription software. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-step method for thematic analysis. Member checking was also used to enhance the study's trustworthiness and ensure the participants' descriptions are accurately depicted (see Candela, 2019).

Definitions

The following operational definitions are applied to key terms in the proposed study:

Class engagement: This term will be defined as the extent to which participants describe their motivation, interactions, interest, and involvement in online versus traditional learning environments (Khlaif et al., 2021).

Hybrid education: This form of education involves the combination of traditional with online learning (Wester et al., 2021).

Online education: This form of education is strictly presented remotely via the Internet and/or other forms of telecommunication, such as telephone or messaging apps (Domina et al., 2021).

Peer connections: This term will be used to define the extent to which participants interact and socialize with classmates via available tools or resources, such as traditional communication and the formation of study groups in the case of classroom settings and comments and messages sent on remote learning platforms in the case of online education (Gares et al., 2020).

Traditional education: This form of education involves a standard classroom environment in which all material is delivered in person with instructors and students present in the same location and at the same time (Serhan, 2020).

Assumptions

Assumptions are study elements that are accepted as valid but cannot be verified (Huntington-Klein, 2021). One assumption was that some human services graduate students have completed both traditional and online courses. This assumption was reasonable given that the COVID-19 pandemic forced students to move from traditional to online learning. Another assumption of the study was that the items on the semistructured interview guide developed for data collection would elicit the information it is intended to elicit. My third assumption was that participants would respond truthfully and authentically to all items on the semistructured interview guide. While participants were encouraged to be truthful and reminded that their responses are confidential and anonymous, there was ultimately no way to determine the authenticity of participant responses. Finally, a fourth assumption was that I would be able to analyze and interpret the data in a manner that was relatively free of bias or *a priori* expectations. To mitigate potential researcher bias, researcher reflexivity was used, including journaling and memoing (see McGrath, 2021). Bracketing procedures, where the researcher actively sets aside preconceived notions and assumptions (Tufford & Newman, 2012), was used to help mitigate researcher bias.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was exploring human services graduate students' descriptions of their online and traditional learning. This study was delimited to graduate students in human services, and those in lower levels of academia may not benefit from the study findings. Additionally, this study was delimited to students who have experience with online and traditional learning. Students who have only experienced traditional classroom settings or those who have only experienced fully remote classroom settings were not included in this study. Finally, this study was further delimited to students attending educational institutions in the United States. Those attending internationally were not included in the study, as these regions may have distinct philosophies and perspectives related to online versus traditional educational settings, as well as a wide range of distinct factors contributing to educational and sociopolitical philosophy that may influence how they perceive the value of remote versus traditional learning environments (Domina et al., 2021; Khlaif et al., 2021; Wester et al., 2021).

Limitations

All research studies have limitations. Limitations are aspects of a study outside the researcher's that detract from its generalizability and applicability to the target population (Mello, 2021). One limitation of this study derived from the small sample size generally used in qualitative studies. The small sample size may limit the transferability of the findings, based on both the richness of the description the researcher is able to provide and the potential for saturation (see Cardano, 2020). Additionally, the instrument used in this study was novel and developed for the purpose of this study. Therefore, it

was not be possible to determine if the items are constructed effectively and efficiently to fully address the research questions of this study (see Leavy, 2022). Finally, this study may be exposed to interpretative bias, as my interpretations played a significant role in the coding and thematic analytical process (see Cardano, 2020). Due to this limitation, member checking was implemented to ensure the data analysis process is valid, establishing credibility and enhancing the dependability of the results (see Candela, 2019).

Significance

This study is significant in answering some of the questions related to traditional classroom and online learning. Many unanswered questions exist about student experiences in traditional and online learning, especially those who can speak to both learning modalities (see Glazer, 2023). Although an abundance of literature exists both before and following the COVID-19 pandemic documenting students' experiences with online versus traditional learning (Gares et al., 2020; Khlaif et al., 2021; Wester et al., 2021), findings from this study may help fill a gap in the evidence that exists in regard to which method is actually preferable for human services students. Studying the experiences of students who have experienced both learning methods may help clarify some previously presented information. These findings may be among the first to specifically document how graduate students in human services describe their experiences with online versus traditional learning.

This study can also bring positive social change in the community and help improve higher education in different fields of learning. Since COVID-19, the number of

students who participate in online learning has increased (Hollister et al., 2022). This study differs from previous qualitative inquiries on this topic because it will involve graduate students and their experiences. Still, the research may benefit many aspects of the educational sphere, including students, teachers, administrators, and student support venues. These findings may also contribute to educational reform and policy design intended to maximize the accessibility and learning opportunities that exist for students in this area by offering support for the efficacy of fully online learning. Conversely, these findings may indicate that online learning is less preferable, thus, reinforcing the value of traditional classroom designs. Either result from this study will help inform educational leaders and policymakers in regard to their decision-making in providing the best education possible to higher education students in the Southeastern United States

This study may further result in positive social changes concerning the social determinants of health (SDOH), especially in areas of education and educational access and quality, especially for nontraditional students who may not have the option of in-person learning due to responsibilities such as work, family, caregiving, geographic and mobility constraints, and accessibility. These implications may be of interest to educational-related professionals but also to human services professionals who support students in the pursuit of education, such as counselors, social workers, and other support and health professionals.

Summary

This chapter contained an introduction to a proposed generic qualitative study intended to describe the experiences of human services graduate students with online and

traditional learning. Background information related to this topic was first presented, followed by a description of the study's problem statement, purpose, and research question. The theoretical underpinning of the study, social learning theory, was discussed, followed by a description of the nature of this generic qualitative inquiry, and a justification for the selection of this research methodology and design. Consideration was then given to the scope and delimitations, assumptions, and limitations of the study. Finally, the potential significance of the study was outlined. Results from this study are intended to add to the large body of evidence documenting the perceptions that students have regarding online and traditional education, thus potentially contributing to policy design and the decision-making of educational leaders in this region to implement the most effective and preferable learning models possible. Chapter 2 contains a comprehensive review of the academic literature regarding online and traditional learning for human services students.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers. The field of human services is fundamentally person-centric and service-oriented, requiring strong communication and interpersonal skills (Fichtenberg et al., 2020). Traditional human services education focused on fostering these skills through in-person classroom learning, but the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that all education be conducted online (Winfield et al., 2023). Winfield et al. (2023) advocated for the adoption of national standards for human services education to ensure that graduating practitioners have the requisite skills necessary for the workforce, citing the challenges associated with online human services education. While online learning has become a widely accepted form of education at all levels in recent years, the efficacy of online education for care-related fields and fields requiring interpersonal connection remains unclear (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020). Other researchers have highlighted a lack of empirical investigations into the effectiveness of online education or the perceptions of students and educators regarding the quality of online learning experiences (Cuttler, 2019; Januamita & Amelia, 2023), highlighting a pressing need for the study.

This chapter is organized into three main sections. First, the literature search strategy is presented. Next, the theory guiding this study, Bandura and Walters' (1977)

social learning theory, is described. This discussion includes information about how social learning theory applies to human services education. The third main section contains a review of the literature regarding traditional and online learning for human services students. Traditional learning and supporting evidence are presented first (see Doo et al., 2023; J. Zhu, Zhou et al., 2023). Focus is then placed on virtual learning environments, and similarities and differences in terms of the quality of education and the experiences of students and educators are analyzed (Koo & Jiang, 2022; Mitic & Djenic, 2023). Gaps in the literature are discussed, along with research design and methodological issues, leading to the rationale and justification for my study. This chapter concludes with a summary and outline of key points.

Literature Search Strategy

To locate key literature relevant to developing a comprehensive understanding of traditional and online learning for human services students, I searched for related peer-reviewed literature within the following databases: Education Resources Information Center, Education Research Complete, and Education Source Ultimate with full text, as well as multidisciplinary databases (ProQuest Central; Thoreau; Education Databases Combined Search). The literature search strategy for this research topic also included articles found within Walden University's dissertation database and Google Scholar. Education and human services databases were selected based on their comprehensiveness and relevance. The keywords I searched for included *human services education*, *online learning, traditional learning, classroom, human services competencies, human services graduates*, *blended learning, academic outcomes*, and *practicals*. I used Boolean logic to

combine these terms and phrases to narrow the search scope. To locate studies that used synonyms for these terms, I also used the MeSH term function. I primarily limited my search criteria to articles published between 2019 and 2024. However, I discovered articles relevant to this research that fell outside these parameters. I selected studies for inclusion if they met the following criteria: (a) published between 2019 and 2024, (b) scholarly peer-reviewed journals, (c) published in English, and (d) studies older than 2019 that are considered to be of a seminal nature, which included literature describing an original theory or instrument used to assess one of the key variables or constructs of interest. The following section contains a presentation of the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation underpinning the design and analysis of this study is Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory. According to social learning theory, individuals learn new behaviors by observing, modeling, and imitating the actions, behaviors, emotional responses, and attitudes of others (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Bandura's social learning theory was a department from the behavioral models of learning, which posited that learning was a result of an individual's direct experience with interaction with their environments (Montano & Kasprzyk, 2015). According to Bandura and Walters , people learn by observing behavior directly through social interactions or indirectly by observing behaviors through media. Actions that are rewarded or receive accolades are likely to be imitated, whereas actions that have negative consequences are likely to be avoided.

Observational Learning

The first tenet of social learning theory is that people can learn through observation (Bandura, 1965). Bandura identified three models of observational learning. The first is a live model, which involves an actual individual demonstrating or acting out a behavior. The second involved a symbolic model, a real or fictional character displayed in books, television, or online media; the third was a verbal instructional model, which involves descriptions and explanations of behavior (Bajcar & Bąbel, 2018). Through these models, individuals observe, model, and imitate actions and behaviors.

Observational learning and models of behavior have implications for traditional and online learning platforms. In traditional classroom settings, human services students observe live models of human services professionals through their instructors' actions and behaviors (Winfield et al., 2023). In contrast, in online settings, students must use the verbal instructional model or a model in which students view a recorded video behavior (Seo et al., 2021).

Mental States Are Important for Learning

The second tenet of social learning theory is that mental states are important for learning. While external reinforcement influences learning, Bandura noted that reinforcement is not always derived from environmental sources (Bandura, 1976). Instead, he posited that mental state and motivation are important influences on whether an individual learns a behavior. Bandura described intrinsic reinforcement as internal rewards for performing a behavior, including pride, satisfaction, and a sense of

accomplishment (Bandura, 1976). Thus, social learning requires more than observational learning.

Motivation and mental state have important implications for graduate education. Unlike earlier forms of education like high school, graduate-level education is not obligatory; presumably, students pursue graduate degrees due to internal desire (Haverila et al., 2020). Students' mental states and attitudes may influence their motivation to pursue traditional or online education (Wong & Fong, 2014). Furthermore, some types of human services learning may be more suited to online learning, such as textbook-style learning, whereas practical learning may be better suited for traditional classrooms (Winfield et al., 2023). Students' motivation and attitudes for each type of learning may influence the education modality they choose.

Key Factors for Learning Success

According to social learning, there are four steps involved in the observational learning and modeling process (Bandura & Walters, 1977). Social learning theory posits that individuals learn by repeating a series of four steps: (a) attention, (b) retention, (c) reproduction, and (d) motivation. By paying attention to a behavior, individuals retain information that can be used to reproduce the behavior (Bandura, 1965; Bandura & Walters, 1977).

The first step in the process of social learning theory involves attention. In order to learn, a student must pay attention to the instructor and comprehend the material, action, or behavior. Distraction negatively influences observational learning and, consequently, social learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The second step is retention.

Retention is the ability to store information previously learned (Hadsell et al., 2020). Retention can be influenced by numerous factors, including repetition, cognitive processes, and motivation for learning (Bandura & Walters, 1977). The third step is reproduction. Once an individual has learned and retained information, they must reproduce the behavior or action. Continual practice of the learned skill or behavior leads to improvements in the behavior (Bandura, 1965). The fourth step in social learning theory is motivation. In order for observational learning to be effective, students must be motivated to repeat a behavior (Rotter, 2021). During this time, individuals may assess whether continued repetition of behavior is advantageous or deleterious.

Human services students likely learn client interaction behaviors through social learning theory. Interaction with clients requires practical observation of acceptable human services techniques, strategies, and practices (Cooper, 2020). Students must then retain learned information about facets of the client interaction to replicate meaningful experiences. Practical-based learning in human services involves the practicing of skills in a controlled classroom environment to allow students to rehearse engaging with potential clients (Winfield et al., 2023). As such, practical learning facilitates the reproduction of behaviors necessitated by social learning theory (Cooper, 2020). Finally, students will be motivated to use learned behaviors and actions when they facilitate positive interactions with potential clients, whereas behaviors that lead to negative actions will not be reproduced.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

The literature review is organized into four main sections. The first section, I discuss will discuss traditional learning, including its benefits and drawbacks. The second main section is focused on online learning, alsohighlighting its benefits and drawbacks. The third main subsection contains a comparison of traditional and online learning. The fourth section describes online learning in human services education.

Traditional Learning

Traditional learning involves students being present in a physical classroom. Graduate students typically engage in face-to-face learning environments within university settings (Omole et al., 2023). This educational method focuses on student-centered classes that promote problem-solving skills and foster close relationships with research-oriented advisors and peers (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). According to recent evidence from scholars such as Alam et al. (2023) and Williams (2022), graduate students generally express satisfaction with their academic and social experiences in these traditional settings. However, some researchers (e.g., Hasibuan et al., 2022; Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023) have suggested a recognized lack of learning and interdisciplinary interaction. Research has also delved into the connection between graduate students' life satisfaction and the perceived significance of their learning experiences in educational settings (Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023). For example, Majewska and Zvobgo (2023) showed that higher levels of peer support are linked to increased student life satisfaction. Additionally, personal and professional life changes that accompany graduate education significantly impact their well-being (Majewska &

Zvobgo, 2023). Graduate education has traditionally focused on using traditional education delivery methods.

Evidence has shown that conventional teaching approaches often focus on lectures and individual tasks, which may not fully cater to workplace skills. For example, according to Karataş Aydin (2023), it was recommended to incorporate collaborative and project-oriented learning techniques to address cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains effectively. These scholars suggested this approach can improve graduate students' outcomes (Karataş Aydin, 2023). Furthermore, critics of traditional methods argue that they often fail to engage students in meaningful and transformative learning experiences (Hastuti et al., 2022). The rigid structure of these methods limits opportunities for developing thinking and adaptability skills essential for success in the contemporary, dynamic job market (Hastuti et al., 2022). Therefore, integrating educational technologies and approaches that facilitate interactive and stimulating learning environments could be crucial for aligning graduate education with current requirements.

Graduate education may not be uniquely suited to traditional learning. Researchers agree that while traditional graduate education has proven effective in some areas, recent research indicates the value of enhancing interactive and interdisciplinary learning experiences to better equip students for professional challenges (Denny et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2022). This critical examination of teaching methodologies highlights the importance of ongoing adaptation and innovation in graduate education to meet the evolving demands of the 21st century (Geller et al., 2023; Karataş Aydin, 2023).

In the following sub-section, a definition of traditional characteristics of traditional classroom learning is presented.

Definitions and Characteristics of Traditional Classroom Learning

In traditional settings, the typical classroom setup involves in-person teaching where a teacher imparts knowledge directly to students gathered in the same physical space (Hastuti et al., 2022). This traditional teaching style is centered around lectures and structured content delivery, with students taking notes and listening passively to absorb information (Karataş Aydin, 2023). While this setup allows for interaction and discussion between students and the instructor, it often leans towards being teacher-centric, leaving minimal room for student initiative and active participation (Koo & Jiang, 2022). However, recent research (e.g., Mayeshiba et al., 2021; Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022) has pointed out shortcomings of traditional classroom setups in higher education, suggesting that they may not be fully equipped to nurture the critical cognitive and interpersonal skills required in today's rapidly changing world. For example, Hasibuan et al. (2022) questioned the effectiveness of lecture-based methods in meeting the evolving educational needs of modern-day students. These researchers argued that these approaches often do not foster thinking and problem-solving abilities, which are essential for graduate students tackling complex real-world issues (Mayeshiba et al., 2021).

Traditional classrooms are not always adequately suited to students' needs. Scholars such as Koo and Jiang (2022) and Zhu, Zhou et al. (2023) have highlighted the fact that the rigid structure of classrooms can sometimes impede the practical application of knowledge to real-life situations as they typically lack modern educational

technologies or methods that support a more interactive and stimulating learning environment. This is consistent with the research by Lowenthal and Trespalacios (2022), who proposed that traditional teaching methods may not fully address all graduate skills like teamwork, communication, and ethical conduct. Most educators have advocated for the adoption of active, collaborative, and project-based learning initiatives to better equip students for both professional and personal achievements (Hastuti et al., 2022; Zhu, Zhou et al., 2023). Although traditional classrooms have laid a groundwork for education delivery, the inherent constraints in this system indicate a necessity for increased integration of innovative teaching strategies that encourage active learning and heightened student involvement (Dziri et al., 2023). Scholars have argued that this trend can fail to meet current educational requirements but guarantee that postgraduate education stays up-to-date and efficient in equipping students for future challenges (Dziri et al., 2023; Xuto et al., 2022). In the following section, consideration is given to the benefits of traditional learning environments.

Benefits of Traditional Learning

Traditional learning has numerous benefits. In conventional learning classrooms characterized by face-to-face teaching and direct interaction between students and instructors, numerous well-documented benefits have been highlighted in recent scholarly research (Karataş Aydin, 2023; Omole et al., 2023). According to Omole et al. (2023), these settings provide a learning experience that places high importance on direct feedback and active discussion participation. One key advantage of learning that has been documented in the literature is its ability to cultivate a profound, immediate, and personal

connection between students and instructors, which is often deemed essential for effective learning (Osman, 2023). As noted by Mitic and Djenic (2023), traditional learning environments significantly improve learner outcomes by ensuring active student engagement throughout the learning journey. This engagement is facilitated through teaching methods and the synchronous interaction inherent in face-to-face settings. Additionally, scholars such as Omole et al. (2023) and Denny et al. (2023) have noted that traditional classroom arrangements offer an organized framework that proves particularly valuable in maintaining order and creating a conducive atmosphere for complex discussions and thorough analysis crucial for advanced education levels. Established routines of traditional classrooms aid in minimizing distractions, potentially enhancing students' focus and retention of information (Osman, 2023). Thus, students' focus and attention may be facilitated by traditional learning.

Traditional learning is important for the development of interpersonal skills. According to Zhu, Zhou et al. (2023), the conventional approach to learning is crucial for honing interpersonal skills like public speaking, debating, and direct engagement, all of which play a key role in one's professional journey. Similarly, the interactive nature of a classroom setting, where students can promptly discuss and argue ideas with both peers and teachers, fosters the growth of critical thinking abilities (Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). This assertion is corroborated by the research conducted by Koo and Jiang (2022), highlighting that despite facing some criticism, traditional teaching methods yield positive outcomes in areas such as problem solving and analytical reasoning within

educational environments. Some aspects of graduate education can be enhanced in traditional learning environments.

Traditional learning methodologies have been scrutinized for their perceived inflexibility and limited capacity to nurture independent learning and creativity compared to more contemporary educational models, such as blended or online learning (Alam et al., 2023). Nevertheless, the direct interaction and immediate feedback mechanisms inherent in traditional classrooms help alleviate these concerns by tailoring discussions and instructional approaches based on students' real-time requirements (Vlachopoulos et al., 2019). This personalized educational experience offered by settings can be challenging to replicate in asynchronous learning environments (Stewart et al., 2022). As education progresses with advancements in technology and teaching methods, traditional learning settings remain valuable for the growth of postgraduate students. These settings may not always facilitate in-depth comprehension of challenging topics through structured and engaging learning experiences but also nurture crucial interpersonal skills vital for professional success (Osman, 2023). Active learning strategies are discussed in the following subsection.

Active Learning Strategies. Active learning methods have gained increasing recognition in the literature for boosting student engagement, comprehension, and critical thinking (Alam et al., 2023; Denny et al., 2023). These approaches differ from lecture-based teaching by involving students directly in learning through activities that promote exploration, discussion, and application of knowledge (Xuto et al., 2022). Brannen et al. (2021) state that active learning can manifest in problem-solving tasks, group projects,

peer teaching sessions, case studies, and interactive simulations. By employing these techniques, an environment is created where students play a role in constructing their understanding rather than just receiving information passively (Brannen et al., 2021). Majewska and Zvobgo (2023) found support for modified learning strategies in graduate pharmacology courses by incorporating practices like pre- and post-lecture assessments, team-based learning activities, and concept mapping exercises. This method significantly boosted student participation and learning outcomes, showcasing the effectiveness of learning in fostering deeper engagement and comprehension of complex topics.

A critical examination of the literature indicates a growing trend toward integrating learning across various educational environments due to its beneficial effects on student performance (Mitic & Djenic, 2023; Wong et al., 2021). For example, Wong et al. (2021) emphasized that simulations and games enhance thinking, problem-solving abilities, and collaborative skills in online classrooms. In a recent study by Doo et al. (2023), it was noted that active learning methods, such as quizzes and role-playing activities, have proven to boost performance and student satisfaction in higher education. Similarly, Denny et al. (2023) found positive effects in their research on engaging students in education. However, researchers (e.g., Canbek & Ceylan, 2022; Koo & Jiang, 2022) have noted that adopting learning approaches comes with its own set of challenges. For example, moving from teaching methods to a more interactive learning environment requires instructors to shift their roles from knowledge providers to student learning facilitators (Hastuti et al., 2022). This transition can be demanding and necessitates planning and support (Wong et al., 2021). Findings from research conducted by Karataş

Aydin (2023) highlighted the importance of designed course elements and instructional practices for effectively implementing active learning strategies in online courses. Active learning signifies a transformation in educational methodologies that can greatly improve learning outcomes in postgraduate education (Mitic & Djenic, 2023). The achievement of this approach hinges on incorporating these tactics into the educational framework and adjusting instructional techniques to foster a dynamic learning atmosphere (Wong et al., 2021). In the following sub-section, consideration is given to the perceived effectiveness of various learning methods for graduate education.

Perceived Effectiveness for Student Learning. The effectiveness of learning methods for graduate students has garnered significant attention, particularly in terms of student preferences when compared to online or blended learning approaches (Humphries & Clark, 2021). Traditional learning, which involves in-person instruction within a classroom setting, is often favored for its direct interaction, which many believe contributes to a more engaging and easily understandable learning environment (Alam et al., 2023). Recent studies (e.g., Alam et al., 2023; Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022) have suggested that graduate students generally view learning as highly effective. According to Alam et al. (2023), students rated classes as highly effective, especially when contrasted with online classes, which were seen as moderately effective. The structured nature of classes was valued by students for promoting clearer communication and a more organized learning experience. Additionally, scholars have noted that traditional learning settings are recognized for their ability to increase student engagement through real-time interactions (Anishchik et al., 2021a; Stewart et al., 2022). For example, Anishchik et al.

(2021a) found that traditional learners valued the humor, relatability of content, and the challenges of learning concepts, considering that these factors enhanced their understanding of the material.

Comparative research has also highlighted the effectiveness of learning in comparison to other approaches (Osman, 2023; Risdiyanti et al., 2019). For example, in a study by Risdiyanti et al. (2019) it was observed that traditional methods yielded outcomes in terms of academic pressure and learning achievements compared to blended learning strategies. This indicates that while modern educational technologies are beneficial, traditional methods still hold value in specific contexts (Risdiyanti et al., 2019). However, one common criticism of learning is its perceived rigidity and passive nature (Vlachopoulos et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the immediate feedback, interaction between teachers and students, and structured learning environments are often regarded as notable advantages that may outweigh the drawbacks, especially in fields that benefit from hands-on experiences or direct demonstrations (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). As education adapts to incorporate digital elements, graduate students still highly appreciate the effectiveness of traditional learning (Rovai, 2019). According to the literature, they tend to find value in the engagement and organized educational methods present in traditional classroom settings, considering them essential for successful learning and academic achievement (Anishchik et al., 2021a; J. Zhu, Zhou et al., 2023). Online learning platforms and accompanying evidence are discussed in the following section.

Online Learning

In the changing landscape of education, researchers have documented how online learning has become increasingly important for its flexibility and accessibility (Jamal et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2022). This section of the review contains a discussion of evidence associated with aspects of online learning, specifically focusing on how it is implemented, its effectiveness, and how graduate students experience it (Doo et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2022). As digital platforms continue to be integrated into systems, researchers (e.g., Canbek & Ceylan, 2022; Rovai, 2019) have noted that it is essential to understand how these virtual environments compare to traditional classrooms and what unique benefits they offer to graduate students. According to Rovai (2019), online learning involves delivering content through digital platforms, allowing students to participate in their studies remotely and at their own pace. This type of learning relies on technological tools that enable interaction, content sharing, and online assessments (Rovai, 2019). The shift towards education has been driven by technological advancements and accelerated by global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a quick transition from face-to-face to remote learning settings (Canbek & Ceylan, 2022).

Moving towards online learning presents challenges and criticisms related to face-to-face interactions and concerns about the impersonal nature of digital communication (Stewart et al., 2022). However, supporters of online learning have argued that virtual learning platforms offer teaching approaches, such as tailored learning experiences, increased access for students overcoming educational obstacles, and the cultivation of

digital skills essential in today's job market. Additionally, researchers have increasingly highlighted the effectiveness of online education within the realm of postgraduate studies, examining both its advantages and possible drawbacks (Denny et al., 2023; Hamad, 2022). Through studies involving student accounts, researchers have been increasingly able to present a detailed view of how online learning influences the academic journeys of postgraduate students (Stewart et al., 2022). Such studies have shed light on teaching methods that improve learning outcomes and the overall influence of online learning on student participation and achievement (Jamal et al., 2023; Mitic & Djenic, 2023). Definitions and characteristics of online learning are discussed in the following section.

Definition and Characteristics of Online Learning

Online education has gained prominence recently due to global changes like the COVID-19 pandemic (Dziri et al., 2023). This form of learning involves delivering content through digital platforms to facilitate learning interactions over the Internet (Anishchik et al., 2021a). This modern educational approach is rapidly evolving thanks to progress, offering students a flexible and convenient way to learn beyond traditional boundaries of time and place (M. Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). Brannen et al. (2021) explain that online learning encompasses various activities that utilize digital technologies for interactions. These activities range from online courses with no in-person meetings to hybrid models combining online and traditional classroom settings (Rovai, 2019). The essence of education lies in its ability to tailor the learning experience to individual student needs and preferences through multimedia resources and interactive digital tools (Humphries & Clark, 2021).

Additionally, Stewart et al. (2022) discussed how the impact of learning goes beyond its tech-driven delivery method. Stewart et al. (2022) also noted that online learning transforms teaching approaches by placing more emphasis on the learner, increasing accessibility, and promoting collaboration. Engaging in learning requires both students and educators to adapt to digital platforms effectively (Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). This mode of education offers a level of independence and flexibility not commonly found in classrooms, demanding students to be self-motivated and skilled in time management (Aydug & Altinpulluk, 2022). Furthermore, online learning environments promote inclusivity and diversity by enabling students from different backgrounds to collaborate and learn together (Hastuti et al., 2022). This interaction can enrich the experience by exposing learners to diverse perspectives (Maraqa et al., 2022). However, the success of online learning greatly depends on the quality of content interactions, technological tools used, and pedagogical methods employed (Xuto et al., 2022). Online learning presents an educational approach that meets the diverse needs of contemporary learners, and advancement in education highlights the necessity for ongoing research and development to improve its effectiveness and ensure it complements or surpasses traditional learning methods in terms of efficacy and student satisfaction (Mitic & Djenic, 2023). The growth of online learning is discussed in the following sub-section.

Growth of Online Learning

The rise of education in higher learning has been a noticeable trend, especially with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). This shift to

classrooms has significantly changed the educational landscape, adapting to technological advancements and shifting societal demands (Checa-Morales et al., 2022). Online learning has seen growth, becoming an essential component of universities worldwide, offering diverse educational opportunities to students from various backgrounds (Smith & Sissons, 2021). A key factor driving the expansion of education that has emerged in the literature is the increased accessibility of digital tools (Brannen et al., 2021). According to Karataş Aydin (2023), universities have broadened their programs to reach a wider audience, including international students and those who need the flexibility that online learning offers due to work or personal obligations. This growth is about numbers and improving the quality and variety of online courses (Mitic & Djenic, 2023). The rapid rise of massive open online courses and other digital platforms has played a role in democratizing access to education, providing top-notch learning resources globally at little to no cost. Additionally, incorporating digital technologies has revolutionized teaching methods in online education. These tools enable learning experiences, innovative assessment techniques, and personalized learning journeys tailored to individual preferences and paces.

Based on the findings of Jamal et al. (2023), the decisions to expand education are influenced by various factors such as economic pressures, the aim to improve educational accessibility, and the integration of innovative teaching methods. This expansion typically involves collaborating with private companies to combine rigor with technological expertise (Smith & Sissons, 2021). The move towards learning also aligns with broader educational objectives like inclusivity and lifelong learning (Wasserman &

Migdal, 2019). Online platforms offer opportunities for traditional students, including adult learners returning to education or individuals in remote areas, to pursue higher education degrees that were previously out of reach (Leech et al., 2022). These platforms not only cover academic subjects but also provide professional development courses tailored to meet evolving industry needs, supporting individuals' continuous professional growth.

However, despite the aspects of online learning, there are challenges related to student engagement and learning effectiveness (Williams, 2022). As noted by Anishchik et al. (2021b), while online education can enhance flexibility and access to learning, it often falls short when it comes to recreating the interactive nature of traditional classrooms. The impact on student engagement and learning results has also highlighted the importance of course design and delivery advancements to create effective learning experiences (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). The expansion of education in higher education is a dynamic and complex evolution fueled by technological progress and societal shifts (Hamad, 2022). While researchers have noted that online brings advantages in terms of accessibility and adaptability, it also presents a challenge for educators and institutions to enhance the quality and involvement of online courses continuously to cater to the educational needs and expectations of a diverse student body (Brannen et al., 2021; Smith & Sissons, 2021). Pre-COVID-19 trends are discussed in the following sub-section.

Pre-COVID-19 Trends. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning had already been on the rise in higher education due to technological advancements and a growing need for flexible and accessible education (Canbek & Ceylan, 2022). During this

time, there was an increase in the availability of online courses and programs tailored to various types of learners, such as international students, working professionals, and individuals pursuing lifelong learning opportunities (Dziri et al., 2023). The trends in learning before the pandemic were characterized by a strategic shift towards digital platforms and the expansion of massive open online courses (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). These online courses played a role in making higher education more inclusive and globally available (Humphries & Clark, 2021). According to Humphries and Clark (2021), institutions viewed the adoption of education as key to their strategic planning efforts, driven by the necessity to accommodate a diverse student population and provide competitive educational offerings that embraced cutting-edge technology.

Prior to the pandemic, there was an emphasis on enhancing the quality of education through improved learning management systems, interactive tools, and personalized learning experiences within academic institutions (Checa-Morales et al., 2022). During the period leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education underwent a notable shift towards embracing online learning as part of a larger movement towards digital transformation in the educational sector (Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023). This shift was crucial to staying relevant and competitive in an evolving environment (Smith & Sissons, 2021). The rise of education prompted extensive discussions and studies on its effectiveness compared to traditional in-person teaching methods (Smith & Sissons, 2021). Research conducted at that time revealed that while online learning offered flexibility and accessibility like never before, it required planning and execution to ensure positive learning outcomes (Williams, 2022). Issues such as

engaging students, retaining their interest, and maintaining high-quality interactions in settings became key areas of academic investigation (Hastuti et al., 2022). Scholars have noted that the pre-pandemic was associated with an evolution in higher education with the increasing popularity of online learning driven by technological advancements and changes in student demographics and preferences (Brannen et al., 2021; Karataş Aydin, 2023). The emphasis was not only on broadening access but also on improving the caliber and efficiency of online education to meet the changing demands of students worldwide (Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). This foundational progress laid the groundwork for the widespread adoption of online learning that would be accelerated by the global health crisis (Holloway & Zhong, 2022). Shifts to online learning that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed in the following sub-section.

Shift to Online Learning During COVID-19 Pandemic. The rapid transition to online education during the COVID-19 outbreak marks a significant moment in the history of schooling, showcasing both the possibilities and obstacles of digital learning (Canbek & Ceylan, 2022). This shift was largely prompted by restrictions and social distancing protocols, which compelled educational institutions to quickly embrace remote teaching methods, providing a unique chance to assess the scalability and effectiveness of online learning during times of crisis (Crosslin et al., 2021). A key aspect of this change was implementing and adapting virtual teaching techniques (Komara & Meliyani, 2021). Studies such as that of Law et al. (2022) highlighted the move from classroom setups to digital platforms, underscoring the importance of reflective practice in assisting educators through this fast-paced transformation. This process sheds light on online learning

approaches ranging from extensive to intensive, each presenting distinct challenges and avenues for learning opportunities (Law et al., 2022).

Additionally, understanding student and faculty perspectives on this shift has been crucial in gauging its impact (Maraqa et al., 2022). For example, Xuto et al. (2022) noted that faculty members' goals for achievement influenced their views on teaching and how these views related to student engagement and satisfaction. Findings from recent studies (e.g., Hariastuti et al., 2021; Maraqa et al., 2022) have indicated that educators who prioritize learning and development adapted well to the shift to online teaching, showing a deeper connection with students despite the unexpected changes. Dziri et al. (2023) also provided a study drawing from past pandemics to provide insights into the effectiveness of online learning strategies implemented during the COVID-19 crisis. The study emphasizes the need for research to enhance e-learning frameworks, ensuring they can withstand sudden shifts in educational delivery (Dziri et al., 2023). The move to online education amid the pandemic has been a nuanced process highlighting educational systems' resilience and adaptability and the significant challenges they encounter in upholding educational standards and equality during crises (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). This experience has offered lessons for future educational planning, particularly in enhancing learning systems' flexibility and responsiveness to unforeseen global events (Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). The advantages and disadvantages of online learning are discussed in the following sub-section.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning

The shift to online education has greatly transformed the way students learn, offering unique benefits alongside some obstacles (Osman, 2023). The flexibility and convenience of this educational format have been linked to several advantages, such as allowing students to engage with their studies from anywhere at any time, fitting around their individual schedules and commitments (Humphries & Clark, 2021). This learning method often proves more cost-effective than traditional settings, cutting down on expenses like commuting and campus living costs and opening up educational opportunities to a wider range of people (Checa-Morales et al., 2022). Additionally, online platforms help students develop skills as they navigate different tools and technologies, equipping them with sought-after abilities for today's job market (Brannen et al., 2021). However, online learning also presents challenges like reliance on technology, leading to issues such as internet connections and inadequate devices hindering effective learning (Hamad, 2022). According to Smith and Sissons (2021), these technological hurdles can create disparities in access to quality education, particularly impacting students from privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, a significant drawback documented in the literature includes the lack of face-to-face interaction in online settings compared to traditional classrooms (Crosslin et al., 2021). This difference can result in reduced student engagement and motivation due to the absence of connections typically found in physical classrooms (Aydug & Altinpulluk, 2022).

Some scholars have suggested that the absence of face-to-face interaction can also lead to feelings of loneliness among students, as well as diminish chances for

spontaneous conversations and deeper cooperation, which are often necessary for a well-rounded educational experience (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022; Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). The efficiency of learning has also been questioned by some scholars, particularly in fields that rely on hands-on or practical training (Wong et al., 2021). Online platforms may restrict the effective execution of coursework, thus affecting the thoroughness and quality of educational results (Omole et al., 2023). These concerns reflect the necessity for teaching methods that boost interactivity and efficacy in education while tackling the technological and pedagogical hurdles associated with such models (Xuto et al., 2022). In light of changes in education, these insights hold significant value for educators and policymakers striving to maximize the advantages while addressing the downsides of virtual learning (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). Student satisfaction and engagement within online learning forms are discussed in the following sub-section.

Student Satisfaction and Engagement. The connection between student contentment and involvement in virtual learning settings has been an increasing focus of educational studies (e.g., Hariastuti et al., 2021; Hastuti et al., 2022), particularly given the widespread use of digital classrooms. Recent research has delved into how these elements are impacted by different aspects of student interaction and course structure (Humphries & Clark, 2021). Student satisfaction is greatly affected by their interactions with classmates, teachers, and course material (Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). A study carried out at a university for distance learning emphasized that interactions among students and between students and educators, along with engagement with course content, positively influence student satisfaction (Aydug & Altinpulluk, 2022). This highlights the

significance of having a designed interactive element in online courses to boost both student engagement and satisfaction (Aydug & Altinpulluk, 2022).

Engagement quality has also been shown to significantly determine student satisfaction (Hariastuti et al., 2021). Actively participating in the learning process through feedback from instructors, creating a sense of community among peers, and having interactive material all contribute to higher satisfaction levels (Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). A multicenter study supported this notion by revealing that increased levels of engagement in programs are linked to higher student satisfaction rates, indicating that engaged students are more likely to persist and successfully complete their programs (Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). However, the shift to education has posed its fair share of difficulties. Recent research has shown that, while online learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it can lead to student satisfaction due to factors such as the lack of in-person interactions, feelings of isolation, and technical challenges (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022). These issues can impact the learning process and diminish student engagement negatively (Checa-Morales et al., 2022).

To address these obstacles, recent studies have suggested that implementing approaches that promote interaction and involvement in online education settings can be of considerable value (Hamad, 2022; Omole et al., 2023). Doing so requires utilizing technology tools for interactive and collaborative learning, creating engaging courses that cater to various learning styles, and establishing robust support systems for students navigating virtual environments (Brannen et al., 2021). Fostering levels of student engagement and satisfaction in online learning requires a well-rounded strategy focused

on interactive and supportive educational experiences (Hariastuti et al., 2021). Thus, scholars have suggested that educational institutions should prioritize enhancing teaching methods and infrastructure continuously to cultivate an enriching and gratifying learning atmosphere that enhances overall educational achievements (Smith & Sissons, 2021). Challenges with this learning format are discussed in the following sub-section.

Challenges With Online Learning. Researchers have noted that online education offers benefits in terms of accessibility and flexibility, but it also comes with challenges that impact the learning experience and results (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). The shift from in-person classes to digital platforms has brought to light both existing obstacles and new difficulties in the field of education (Humphries & Clark, 2021). One of the challenges of online learning that can manifest in some contexts consists of technology access and associated difficulties (Xuto et al., 2022). According to Omole et al. (2023), many students and teachers still encounter problems such as internet connections, limited access to necessary devices, and a lack of familiarity with digital tools, and these challenges can significantly disrupt the learning process, making it hard for individuals to engage with course materials and participate in activities effectively. Research has shown that poor internet connectivity is an issue that not only affects session attendance but also diminishes the overall quality of the educational experience (Xuto et al., 2022).

The transition to virtual education has also led to varying impacts on student engagement and motivation (Bagdi et al., 2023). In some contexts, the absence of interaction in a classroom setting can lead to feelings of isolation among learners, reducing their involvement and active participation (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022).

Establishing a sense of community and collaboration, which are elements that commonly manifest in traditional classroom environments, can pose a significant challenge in virtual environments (Smith & Sissons, 2021). Educators may face increasing difficulties in recreating these dynamics online, which are vital for fostering a supportive and interactive learning atmosphere (Black et al., 2019). Preparing educational content can also present difficulties (Black et al., 2019; Holloway & Zhong, 2022). According to Kilinç and Medeni (2022), educators must revamp their lessons to suit the online setting, requiring not only technical expertise but also a knack for engaging students through digital platforms. The importance of training in digital teaching methods for teachers has also become increasingly evident, given that the success of online learning largely hinges on how well instructors can deliver content in an engaging and interactive manner (Kilinç & Medeni, 2022).

The administrative and support systems within institutions also encounter obstacles when it comes to facilitating the swift and extensive transition to online education (Koo & Jiang, 2022). From providing assistance to students and faculty members to adjusting assessment and evaluation practices for online learning, there are substantial logistical challenges at play (Law et al., 2022). Addressing these issues demands planning and resource management to ensure that the shift toward online education maintains educational standards and equality (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). Thus, while online learning presents promising prospects for broadening access to education, it brings about a host of hurdles that must be tackled effectively for results (Omole et al., 2023). These challenges encompass barriers, fostering student engagement and

motivation, adapting teaching approaches and content delivery methods, as well as ensuring institutional support and logistical arrangements are in place (Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023). Researchers have noted that it is crucial to tackle these obstacles to improve the quality and impact of education, ensuring it caters to various learning requirements and choices (Crosslin et al., 2021; Hamad, 2022). Comparisons between online and traditional learning platforms are made in the following section.

Comparison of Traditional and Online Learning

Researchers have debated whether traditional or online learning is more effective, and this topic has become increasingly important due to the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Anishchik et al., 2021b; Crosslin et al., 2021). Studies from academia have highlighted subtle distinctions that emphasize the advantages and disadvantages of each learning method (Anishchik et al., 2021b; Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). For example, recent research in areas like computer science suggests that online learning can boost technical skills because of digital tools. Still, it may lack the robust problem-solving dynamics found in face-to-face classroom interactions (Hasibuan et al., 2022). Similarly, in fields such as medicine, where hands-on skills and clinical interactions are crucial, traditional learning is often seen as superior due to its direct mentorship and practical experiences that online platforms struggle to provide (Koo & Jiang, 2022; Omole et al., 2023).

The level of interaction and engagement that exists in virtual versus traditional learning environments can differ significantly (Maraqa et al., 2022; Smith & Sissons, 2021). Traditional classrooms excel in promoting intellectual debates and direct

communication, which are essential for subjects requiring high levels of collaboration (Holloway & Zhong, 2022). Despite its flexibility and capability to reach students across different locations, online education can result in students feeling isolated and having fewer opportunities for personal interactions (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). According to Bagdi et al. (2023), this can impact student engagement and overall satisfaction with the learning experience. Furthermore, transitioning from traditional to online learning environments requires pedagogical adjustments on the part of instructors (Xuto et al., 2022). Thus, educators may need to adjust their teaching materials for platforms, which not only calls for technical expertise but also a profound understanding of how to engage students effectively in virtual settings (Mitic & Djenic, 2023).

Technology accessibility is another issue that has been documented in the literature (Maraqa et al., 2022; Wasserman & Migdal, 2019). According to Wasserman and Migdal (2019), online learning relies on internet connections and digital devices, which can be challenging for students in underdeveloped regions or those facing financial constraints. This challenge is less prominent in educational setups where resources like textbooks and face-to-face lectures make learning accessible to all students regardless of their digital resources (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). Thus, while online education offers benefits in terms of accessibility and catering to diverse learner schedules, it also presents challenges that are less common in traditional educational environments (Koo & Jiang, 2022). These challenges include reliance on technology and the necessity for pedagogical adjustments to uphold educational quality (Xuto et al., 2022). Conventional education, with its emphasis on learning and personal interaction between students and teachers, still

holds significant importance, especially in disciplines that demand hands-on involvement (Anishchik et al., 2021b). As the demands of education change over time, a blended method that integrates online and traditional learning could become more common, striving to provide a well-rounded, adaptable, and impactful educational journey (Crosslin et al., 2021). Debates about the efficacy of online versus traditional learning platforms are discussed in the following sub-section.

Debate over Efficacy of Online Versus Traditional Learning

The ongoing discussion surrounding the effectiveness of education compared to traditional in-person learning has gained momentum, especially with the widespread adoption of digital platforms prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Canbek & Ceylan, 2022). Recent studies, such as that of Williams (2022) and Osman (2023), have offered new insights into how these two educational approaches measure up against each other, highlighting their respective strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, research across disciplines, such as computer science and business, has indicated that while online learning can boost specific skills through its use of digital resources, it often lacks in cultivating the holistic problem-solving capabilities nurtured in face-to-face classroom settings (Archila et al., 2022; Koo & Jiang, 2022). For instance, one recent study exploring traditional versus learning in computer-related fields revealed that while online methods excel in technical tasks like programming, traditional approaches outshine them in fostering broader analytical skills (Koo & Jiang, 2022). Student perspectives regarding the effectiveness of these learning modes vary as well (Maraqa et al., 2022). Some research has shown that students value the flexibility and convenience offered by learning

but express higher satisfaction with traditional classroom settings due to better communication and interaction opportunities with teachers and peers (Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022).

In fields like medicine and engineering, hands-on experiences play a role in effective learning (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). Online learning can also be highly effective when digital tools are used appropriately and courses are well-designed (Omole et al., 2023). This form of learning has the potential to match or even surpass traditional learning methods in terms of content delivery and resource accessibility. Additionally, the success of online learning hinges on factors like course design quality, interactive online platforms, and support systems for students navigating their learning journey (M. Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). The main challenge associated with online learning often lies in creating environments replicating traditional classrooms' interactive and engaging nature (Hamad, 2022). According to Williams (2022), educational institutions must focus on enhancing interaction, engagement, and support for students as they transition to formats to improve the overall effectiveness of online learning. While traditional methods remain valuable for hands-on experiences, research has shown that online learning can be just as effective with attention to design and student support (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). According to Holloway and Zhong (2022), the future of education is likely to include a blend of modern methods to accommodate various learning styles and needs better.

Arguments that Online Learning is Superior. Recent studies highlight the benefits of education for graduate students, emphasizing its flexibility, accessibility, and incorporation of innovative educational technologies (Geller et al., 2023; Maraqa et al.,

2022). One key advantage of learning that has been documented in the literature is its adaptability, which allows students to manage their academic commitments alongside personal and professional duties more efficiently than in traditional settings (Bagdi et al., 2023). This flexibility is particularly important for students who often have multiple responsibilities (Crosslin et al., 2021). According to one recent study (i.e., Geller et al., 2023), graduate students highly appreciate the opportunity to engage with course materials using digital resources like e-texts and video tutorials, which may not be as easily accessible in traditional classrooms. The option to access a range of learning tools as needed enhances the learning experience by enabling students to interact with materials at their own pace and based on their individual preferences (Humphries & Clark, 2021).

Additionally, online programs can cultivate a sense of community and emotional connection despite the absence of physical interaction (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). Sofroniou and Premnath (2022) explored engagement in online learning among nontraditional graduate students and revealed that virtual environments can effectively support emotional interactions and connections, fostering a supportive educational community. Emotional factors also play a role in how satisfied students feel about their online learning experiences, as highlighted by Mitic and Djenic (2023). Furthermore, the technology-focused nature of education provides a unique opportunity for students to develop essential digital skills required in today's job market (Kuzu Demir et al., 2022). Cuttler (2019) also highlighted how online and hybrid teaching methods could boost

qualities like adaptability, problem-solving abilities, and digital literacy, which are attributes that tend to be highly sought after by employers.

While online learning brings benefits, it's important to recognize the obstacles it presents, such as potential decreases in engagement compared to traditional classrooms (Hasibuan et al., 2022). However, with course planning and the integration of interactive tools, these hurdles can be overcome. Studies show that designed online learning environments that incorporate active learning techniques and real-time interactions can deliver educational outcomes on par with or even surpassing those of traditional teaching methods (Holloway & Zhong, 2022; M. Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). Despite the obstacles that come with learning, its benefits in terms of flexibility, accessibility, and the cultivation of essential graduate skills make it an appealing choice for graduate studies (Geller et al., 2023). With contemporary advancements in educational technology, online learning is poised to further improve and revolutionize graduate education, becoming a crucial element of future higher education strategies (Maraqa et al., 2022). Arguments supporting the superiority of traditional learning are discussed in the following sub-section.

Arguments that Traditional Learning is Superior. Recent studies (e.g., Geller et al., 2023; Kilinç & Medeni, 2022) have highlighted reasons why traditional education is preferred for graduate students, emphasizing the importance of in-depth learning, face-to-face interactions, and effective teaching methods. One significant benefit of traditional learning that has been documented in the literature is its ability to cultivate understanding and critical thinking skills, which are especially crucial in advanced education, where

complex ideas and analytical abilities are key (Lanz et al., 2022). According to Lanz et al. (2022), conventional teaching approaches, while often criticized for being instructor-centered, excel at fostering graduate qualities like critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and communication proficiency. These skills are honed through engagement, robust discussions, and prompt feedback within traditional classroom settings—elements that may not be as prominent in online platforms (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). Furthermore, traditional educational settings offer an environment that aids in maintaining student attention and discipline, which are elements that can prove challenging to emulate in virtual spaces (Hamad, 2022). The physical presence within a classroom helps create an ambiance for intensive learning sessions.

Maraqa et al. (2022) examined relationships between teachers and students in educational settings play a vital role in promoting deeper learning and student satisfaction. These environments often allow a nuanced understanding of students' needs and learning preferences (Maraqa et al., 2022). Some researchers argue traditional education to excel in courses that involve hands-on experiences in scientific and engineering fields where practical labs and real-time problem-solving are essential (Bagdi et al., 2023; Maraqa et al., 2022). The physical manipulation of materials and direct observation of phenomena offer learning opportunities that virtual simulations struggle to replicate (Crosslin et al., 2021). The human interaction aspect of education also greatly impacts learning outcomes (Xuto et al., 2022). The spontaneous exchanges that occur in classrooms create a dynamic intellectual atmosphere that fosters diverse viewpoints and collaborative learning (Lo & Hew, 2020). These interactions are instrumental in

developing skills like communication, teamwork, and negotiation, which are valuable in professional contexts (Leech et al., 2022). While online education brings benefits like flexibility and accessibility, traditional methods excel in areas relevant to graduate studies (Stewart et al., 2022). Research has shown that these primarily include promoting comprehension of complex concepts, enhancing critical thinking through direct engagement, and providing a structured learning environment conducive to discipline (Xuto et al., 2022). In this way, conventional educational environments are still of critical importance in advanced learning, especially in fields that thrive on practical involvement and meaningful social engagements (Lanz et al., 2022). The following section contains a discussion of the importance of understanding student experiences.

Importance of Understanding Student Experiences

Understanding the experiences of students plays a vital role in improving the quality and effectiveness of their education (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). Recent studies (e.g., Holloway & Zhong, 2022; Smith & Sissons, 2021) have shed light on aspects of these experiences, underlining their impact on student achievement, satisfaction, and overall learning outcomes. Students' experiences are influenced by academic and social factors (Komara & Meliyani, 2021). For instance, a study by Archila et al. (2022) examined how grad students perceive their social interactions in science and engineering programs. These researchers found that students value their education and relationships with mentors and peers (Archila et al., 2022). However, these authors also highlighted the need for collaborative learning opportunities and interdisciplinary engagement to enrich the educational journey of graduate students (Archila et al., 2022).

Graduate education quality is also heavily dependent on how students view and participate in their learning environments (Bagdi et al., 2023). Cuttler (2019) evaluated education quality based on student experiences related to success, self-learning, and well-being, finding that it is crucial to consider students' educational experiences when predicting the effectiveness of education. Additionally, gaining insights into student experiences can aid institutions in making well-informed management decisions (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022). Leech et al. (2022) examined the experiences of graduate students in different learning formats, showcasing how these experiences differ throughout their education and can guide enhancements in teaching practices and support systems. Studies argue that the significance of comprehending graduate student experiences lies in its ability to elevate the quality of education and student contentment (Crosslin et al., 2021; Kilinç & Medeni, 2022). By analyzing these experiences, educators and administrators can pinpoint strengths and areas for enhancement within graduate programs, creating an environment that fosters both academic achievement and personal growth (M. Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). The following section contains a discussion of evidence related to online learning in human services education.

Online Learning in Human Services Education

Online education in the realm of human services has received increasing attention in the literature, especially as academic institutions incorporate digital platforms into their teaching methods (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022; Osman, 2023). Examples include the growing shift to learning in fields like social work and public health, which traditionally rely on in-person interaction, bringing about both opportunities and obstacles (Holloway

& Zhong, 2022; Williams, 2022). One key aspect of education in human services that has been documented in the literature consists of the capacity to broaden access and diversify learning opportunities (Lo & Hew, 2020; Mitic & Djenic, 2023). For example, a recent study by Checa-Morales et al. (2022) examined the implementation of courses on leadership and supervision within advanced social work programs delivered both on campus and online. Despite concerns about the absence of practical experience, Checa-Morales et al. (2022) found that online courses effectively equip students with the advanced knowledge and skills necessary for leadership roles in human service organizations. The research highlighted how online platforms can break down barriers for students who may not have access to training due to geographical or financial constraints (Checa-Morales et al., 2022).

The effectiveness of online learning in teaching complex human services subjects is underscored by successful outcomes from adapting service-learning components for virtual environments as well (Crosslin et al., 2021). Holloway and Zhong (2022) evaluated a health promotion service-learning course that was conducted entirely online, finding that students felt confident in carrying out health promotion tasks and that recipients of the services were highly satisfied. This finding reflects how online learning can effectively support service-learning aspects in human services education. Furthermore, integrating learning in gerontological social work training programs has proven that a rights-based approach can be successfully conveyed through digital platforms (Komara & Meliyani, 2021). Komara and Meliyani (2021) revealed that an online program centered on rights significantly improved social workers' understanding

of human rights, underscoring the value of online training in sensitive areas of human services. However, challenges with online learning still exist in this context, particularly in regard to the depth of interaction and the practical application of skills learned through online means (Hamad, 2022). Thus, researchers have noted that it is essential for online human services programs to offer engaging learning experiences that replicate the liveliness of face-to-face interactions to maximize the effectiveness and impact of online education in this field (M. Zhu, Berri et al., 2023). According to M. Zhu, Berri et al. (2023), the changing nature of education in the field of human services requires ongoing creativity and evaluation to utilize digital learning opportunities while also acknowledging its constraints fully. Considerations for human services students regarding online learning are discussed in the following sub-section.

Unique Considerations for Human Services Students

Human services education warrants certain considerations regarding the effectiveness and influence of training programs designed for students preparing for roles in social work, counseling, and community service (Koo & Jiang, 2022; Leech et al., 2022). Recent research has emphasized areas that need focused attention to ensure that human services students are well-equipped to address the diverse needs of their future clients (Dziri et al., 2023; Hansen-Brown et al., 2022). For example, one critical aspect of human services education involves developing an understanding of professional identity (Crosslin et al., 2021). This is especially significant for students in community colleges, who bring backgrounds and experiences into the field (Bagdi et al., 2023). Bagdi et al. (2023) explored how identity evolves among community college students during field

placements, highlighting the significance of structured reflection and support in nurturing a sense of belonging and dedication to their profession. These researchers also presented a novel framework for professional identity formation that could shape curriculum design and support services, preparing students adequately for their future responsibilities. Similarly, Lotfabadi and Abokhamis Mousavi (2022) examined the correlation between suitability for a profession and ethical growth manifests, stressing the significance of ethical instruction and policies on suitability in human services programs. Their research emphasizes the role of deeply embedding ethics into the curriculum to equip students to navigate the moral intricacies they will encounter in their future careers, aiding their ethical growth and professional readiness.

Interprofessional collaboration in education has also been found to be essential in human services training (Leech et al., 2022; Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). Leech et al. (2022) advocated for the integration of such collaboration in human services programs to ensure students are equipped to collaborate across diverse fields. Denny et al. (2023) also examined how to most effectively align human services education with competencies associated with successful teamwork and client care within a multidisciplinary setting. These studies collectively underscore aspects critical to human services education, emphasizing a holistic approach that encompasses professional identity, ethical maturation, and interprofessional cooperation (Denny et al., 2023; Lanz et al., 2022). Accordingly, focusing on these aspects can greatly improve how students are trained for the ever-evolving and diverse field of human services, enabling them to effectively cater

to the needs of various populations (Lanz et al., 2022). Consideration is given to interpersonal interactions in the following section.

Focus on Interpersonal Interactions. Another trend to emerge in the literature involves understanding and improving how people connect with each other via online learning, which is crucial in human services education (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022; Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023). The quality of practice has been found to hinge on effective communication and the ability to build relationships. Recent studies have provided new insights into the importance of these interactions, highlighting their impact on the growth and progress of students studying human services (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022; İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). Researchers have noted that interpersonal skills are especially vital in teacher training as educators shape students' behavior and cognitive development (Aydug & Altinpulluk, 2022; Hasibuan et al., 2022). For example, Hasibuan et al. (2022) stressed that interpersonal skills, including communication and relationship management, are essential for teachers to create a learning environment. This environment is important for academic learning and the emotional and social well-being of students, which are fundamental aspects of human services education. Law et al. (2022) also explored how future social work teachers are prepared to engage with others on a level. Being ready for engagement is a critical skill necessary for effectively organizing social and educational processes. This author highlighted the importance of training methods that improve these skills, such as professional scenarios and business simulations. According to Law et al. (2022), these approaches mirror real-world challenges and help cultivate essential interpersonal skills in a controlled and reflective manner.

The interpersonal dimension of education plays a role in nurturing the teacher-student relationship, which researchers have found significantly impacts the learning journey (Smith & Sissons, 2021; Williams, 2022). Williams (2022) examined aspects of teacher-student interactions, underscoring the pivotal nature of these connections in maintaining educational effectiveness. This author argued that teachers 'demeanor and ability to establish a supportive rapport with students are crucial for successful educational outcomes (Williams, 2022). Findings from the recent literature collectively underscore the significance of exchanges in human services education (Lo & Hew, 2020; Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). Researchers agree that effective interpersonal abilities are essential for academic achievement and fundamental to future human services practitioners' professional competence and efficacy (Denny et al., 2023; Williams, 2022). Additionally, effective communication, relationship management, and empathetic engagement are aspects of training programs in this domain, highlighting the importance of educational approaches that focus on these skills (Crosslin et al., 2021). The following section contains a discussion of the shift to online learning that has occurred since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Shift to Online Learning During COVID-19. The transition to online education during the global COVID-19 pandemic has been a pivotal moment for schools worldwide, reshaping how courses are delivered and experienced, and transformation has highlighted both the advantages and challenges of learning (Bagdi et al., 2023; Hamad, 2022). In response, educational institutions had to embrace new online teaching methods at an unprecedented scale swiftly (Law et al., 2022). For example, many medical schools

were required to transition their curricula to remote delivery, a significant departure from their traditional hands-on training approach (Leech et al., 2022). Law et al. (2022) examined pandemics to understand the implications of online learning during such emergencies, finding that, while the shift was achievable, it required adjustments in educational practices and techniques. This shift has also influenced how faculty members and students view online learning (Lotfabadi & Abokhamis Mousavi, 2022). For example, Lotfabadi and Abokhamis (2022) investigated how university faculty members' goals impacted their perceptions of teaching, finding that professors who approach learning with a growth mindset saw the transition to teaching as a chance to improve their skills. This finding reflects how faculty attitude plays a role in the successful implementation of online education.

From the students' viewpoint, researchers found that the transition to online education posed difficulties, especially concerning engagement and satisfaction (Jamal et al., 2023; Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022). Bagdi et al., (2023) assessed how moving from traditional to learning impacted undergraduate students, noting both positive and negative aspects. According to the findings, while some students enjoyed the flexibility and accessibility of classes, many encountered challenges with technology, time management, and mental well-being, resulting in dissatisfaction with the online learning experience (Bagdi et al., 2023). These studies collectively highlight the intricacies involved in transitioning to education during crises like the pandemic (Bagdi et al., 2023; Law et al., 2022). Additionally, the evidence has demonstrated that while online teaching can be effective in emergencies, it necessitates planning, proper resource allocation, and a

supportive educational environment for genuine success (Lee, 2019; Lo & Hew, 2020). Thus, it is essential for organizations looking to make the most of online learning to see the importance of these factors not in times of crisis but as a long-term and essential component of their educational programs (Humphries & Clark, 2021). The following section contains a discussion of existing research pertaining to human services student preferences for online versus virtual learning.

Existing Research on Human Services Student Preferences

Recent studies have highlighted the preferences of students studying services, revealing the diverse needs and expectations within this student community (Han, 2023; Law et al., 2022). According to Archila et al. (2022), understanding these nuances is vital for creating customized experiences that cater to individuals' goals and professional standards in the human services field. Students pursuing human services degrees in community colleges encounter unique obstacles that shape their educational inclinations (Koo & Jiang, 2022). One recent study by Han (2023) indicated that students in community college human services programs highly value the development of an identity, which facilitates their entry into the workforce. This research underscores the importance of structures that promote professional identity formation through practical field experiences and introspective learning activities, suggesting these components are crucial for addressing the specific requirements of these students (Han, 2023). Additionally, aspiring human services professionals place emphasis on ethical training and readiness for handling complex and delicate scenarios essential to their future roles. Hamad (2022) underscored the link between preparedness and ethical growth, advocating

for comprehensive ethical education and transparent fitness guidelines within human services curricula. The research emphasizes the significance of integrating ethics into the curriculum to adequately equip students for the moral challenges they may encounter in their future careers (Hamad, 2022).

Additionally, a strong inclination toward learning experiences has become evident among students in human services (Lanz et al., 2022; Osman, 2023). For example, Lanz et al. (2022) discovered that engaging in research during studies within human services significantly boosts students' career prospects and academic growth. Their study highlighted the need for a greater number of research opportunities that focus on application bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and applied practice (Lanz et al., 2022). These investigations combine to demonstrate the need for human services education emphasizing professional identity development, ethical training, and hands-on learning experiences (Denny et al., 2023; Stewart et al., 2022). Thus, meeting these requirements is a contemporary necessity in preparing human services students to fulfill their future professional responsibilities and positively impact the communities they will serve (Xuto et al., 2022). The following sub-section contains a discussion of evidence related to student preferences for online learning.

Studies Finding Preference for Online Learning. Recent research exploring students' preferences regarding online education has offered important insights into the factors influencing these preferences and their impact on student satisfaction and academic performance (Black et al., 2019; Jamal et al., 2023). For example, Black et al. (2019) examined students' perspectives on learning within university settings using the

technology acceptance model, finding that, while students appreciated the creativity, innovation, convenience, and sustainability of online learning, they had concerns regarding expenses and unreliable internet connectivity. Most students favored a learning approach that combines online and in-person classes. (Black et al., 2019). This finding tends to suggest that although online courses have advantages, they are not the preferred primary mode of education post-pandemic. This recognition reflects the value of online learning while also highlighting key issues that require attention to improve its effectiveness and acceptance.

In another recent study, Han (2023) focused on the reading habits and preferences of students in an online context. The findings indicated a preference for digital reading materials over traditional printed resources, suggesting that students are at ease with digital formats when it comes to enhancing their learning experience. However, these researchers also noted that even though students show a preference for reading, their overall reading habits are not as proficient as those of students in traditional learning platforms (Han, 2023). This indicates the importance of creating interactive online materials to help improve reading and learning behaviors among students (Han, 2023). Another study by Geller et al. (2023) discussed student preferences for versus traditional learning in various fields. The findings revealed that while students value the convenience of lectures, particularly when recordings are accessible, they still prefer in-person small-group teaching, collaborative projects, and face-to-face assessments. This suggests that while online platforms can effectively deliver content, hands-on and customized educational activities are better suited for traditional settings and offer a

nuanced understanding of how different teaching methods can be tailored to suit educational tasks (Han, 2023). Findings from the literature have combined to shed new light on the landscape of student choices regarding online education (Lee, 2019; Lo & Hew, 2020). Despite recognizing the benefits and environmental merits of digital learning, concerns persist regarding engagement levels, interaction opportunities, and overall learning quality (Hasibuan et al., 2022). Therefore, improving support in designing engaging courses and incorporating hybrid learning approaches could boost student happiness and improve the effectiveness of online education (Lo & Hew, 2020). The following sub-section contains a discussion of studies about preferences for traditional learning.

Studies Finding Preference for Traditional Learning. Recent research has also looked examined student preferences for traditional in-person learning environments (Lee, 2019; Vlachopoulos et al., 2019). One recent study pertaining to this topic compared student satisfaction levels in blended learning settings (Jamal et al., 2023). Results showed that, while blended learning was praised for its flexibility and use of tools, traditional learning environments were still highly valued for their organized and interactive approach (Jamal et al., 2023). This indicates that traditional methods are still important for meeting the preferences of many students, particularly when personal interaction and immediate feedback are essential. Another recent study by Lowenthal and Trespalacios (2022) focused on the preferences of civil engineering students regarding traditional classroom teaching versus classes during the quarantine period. Results demonstrated that despite the shift to learning, a significant number of students preferred

traditional classrooms for certain types of activities that require complex problem-solving and hands-on experience (Lowenthal & Trespalacios, 2022).

Preferences for learning settings have been shown to be linked to the extent to which these settings are engaging, interactive, and less isolating in nature (Hansen-Brown et al., 2022; Majewska & Zvobgo, 2023). Januamita and Amelia (2023) also highlighted that despite the advancements in tools and digital innovations, traditional learning environments remain favored for their stability, reliability, and ability to foster direct interpersonal connections. The study emphasizes the importance of recognizing these preferences to create systems that effectively blend the strengths of both traditional and modern educational technologies (Januamita & Amelia, 2023). The evidence has combined to demonstrate the continued significance of traditional learning approaches, especially for students who appreciate the structured, interactive, and community-focused aspects of education (Lee, 2019; Lo & Hew, 2020). Accordingly, while digital advancements offer advantages in education, it is evident that traditional learning setups continue to play a vital role in providing unique benefits that are challenging to replicate in an online setting (Archila et al., 2022; Lee, 2019). The following section contains a discussion of the literature involving the need to continue to explore this topic, particularly with respect to human services students.

Need to Further Explore Human Services Student Experiences

Multiple scholars have noted that further investigation into the experiences of students in services is crucial for improving educational programs and better equipping them for the demands of careers in areas like social work, counseling, and community

service (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022; Lanz et al., 2022). Similarly, recent research has identified areas that require more attention to effectively understand and support these students (Hasibuan et al., 2022; Lo & Hew, 2020). Bostan Sarioglan and Çelik (2022) conducted a recent study involving the experiences of human services students in research labs at practitioner-focused universities were explored. The authors uncovered themes such as challenges with meeting basic needs, positive relationships between faculty and students, creating growth opportunities, and fostering a collaborative team environment (Bostan Sarioglan & Çelik, 2022). These findings emphasize the significance of nurturing connections and providing structured opportunities to create conducive learning environments for human services students (Bostan Sarioglan & Çelik, 2022). The study suggests that addressing both academic needs through improved interactions between faculty and students as well as practical engagement opportunities can greatly enhance educational outcomes (Bostan Sarioglan & Çelik, 2022).

Another area warranting investigation is the influence of field placements on the development of professional identity among community college students studying human services. Wong et al. (2021) introduced a framework based on the professional socialization model, highlighting the distinct challenges community college students in human services programs face. The research reflects the importance of implementing tailored support approaches to assist these students in navigating the complexities of field placements and smoothly transitioning into roles (Wong et al., 2021).

Additionally, internships amid the COVID-19 pandemic have brought about new aspects of student experiences that merit further exploration. İlhan and Kirmizigul, 2022

conducted a recent study pertaining to the perceptions of faculty members, students, and human services professionals towards remote internships. The authors noted the advantages of flexibility and cost-efficiency associated with placements the research also identified notable hurdles linked to the absence of face-to-face interactions and potential impacts on learning and professional advancement (İlhan & Kirmizigul, 2022). Continuing to study this topic remains crucial in determining the significance of internships in human services education post-pandemic (Sofroniou & Premnath, 2022). The recent evidence has also reflected the necessity for continued exploration into student experiences within human services (Koo & Jiang, 2022; Leech et al., 2022). By studying these topics, educators and policymakers can devise more impactful strategies to bolster student learning and professional development, ultimately enhancing preparedness for the demands of human services roles (Geller et al., 2023).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter contained a review of the literature regarding this topic. Traditional learning and supporting evidence were presented first. Focus was then placed on virtual learning environments, and similarities and differences in terms of the quality of education and the experiences of students and educators were analyzed. Gaps in the literature were discussed, along with research design and methodological issues, leading to the rationale and justification for the proposed study. According to the evidence, online learning has become a more widely accepted form of education at all levels in recent years. However, limited research exists documenting the effectiveness of this format or the perceptions of students and educators in regard to the quality of online learning

experiences. Therefore, the purpose of the proposed study is to evaluate these experiences and provide novel insight into the role that virtual-based learning formats play in contemporary education. Chapter 3 presents the method and design to be implemented in this study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

Traditional human resources graduate education relies on face-to-face learning, especially for practical components of the curriculum for learning client communication techniques (Winfield et al., 2023). Such competency-based learning that requires human interaction may be better suited to traditional learning environments rather than virtual ones (Callister & Love, 2016). However, recent changes to human services curricula involving online platforms may provide flexibility and autonomy to students learning virtually (Bowen, 2020). Students' perspectives of human services education delivered through traditional and online modalities have yet to be described. Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers.

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the rationale for choosing the qualitative methodology and a descriptive research design. The role of the researcher in this qualitative descriptive inquiry is then discussed. The study's methodology is described in detail, including procedures for participant selection, the study's instrumentation and pilot study, and procedures for recruitment, participation, data collection, and data analysis. I then discuss the methods that were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations addressed. The chapter closes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

A research question was devised to address the problem and purpose of this study:

RQ1: How do graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers?

The study's central phenomenon was how graduate-level human service students describe their educational experiences related to their traditional and online human services coursework.

The qualitative research tradition was chosen for this study. Qualitative research is used when the boundaries of a phenomenon are defined, but in-depth, rich knowledge is lacking (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020). This method was appropriate because, although numerical data about human services learning is available—such as published statistics on how many and what types of students have enrolled in graduate programs—there is a lack of in-depth understanding of students' lived experiences. For example, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2024) provides data on enrollment demographics and program modalities at U.S. institutions, yet these datasets do not offer insight into students' educational experiences. Rich, qualitative data were therefore needed and accessible through qualitative research (LaDonna et al., 2021). Investigators use qualitative approaches to explore participants' experiences and perspectives in-depth, allowing those experiences to guide data collection and interpretation (Yates & Leggett, 2016). Since the purpose of this study was to explore how graduate-level human services

students described their traditional and online educational experiences, the qualitative methodology was well-suited to the research aims.

A qualitative descriptive research design was selected due to its alignment with the study's problem and purpose. Qualitative descriptive research is used to capture individuals' experiences with a central phenomenon in a rich and meaningful way (Colorafi & Evans, 2016). This design also offers flexibility, enabling researchers to adjust their approach during data collection to support deeper thematic development (Milne & Oberle, 2005). According to Kim et al. (2017), qualitative descriptive research allows for the collection of robust, context-rich data that support a complete understanding of the problem under investigation. This design was therefore appropriate for examining the educational experiences of graduate human services students.

Other qualitative designs, including phenomenology, ethnography, and case study, were considered but not selected. Phenomenology seeks to uncover the shared essence of participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). While this approach may have been suitable if the goal were to understand the underlying essence of students' educational journeys, the focus of this study was narrower, centering on specific aspects of modality in human services education. As such, phenomenology was not chosen. Case study research focuses on in-depth exploration within a specific context or organization (Yin, 2018). This might have been appropriate if the study were confined to a single program or institution, but that was not the intent. Finally, ethnography, used to examine cultural behaviors in natural settings (Wolf, 2012), did not align with the research focus

on educational experience rather than cultural practices. Thus, the qualitative descriptive design was most appropriate for the research objectives.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative researchers serve multiple roles in research studies. They are considered human instruments, gathering data directly from participants (Xu & Storr, 2012). In this study, I served as the primary investigator and fulfilled several responsibilities: (a) selecting the research methodology and design; (b) recruiting, sampling, and enrolling participants; (c) conducting semistructured interviews; (d) ensuring data integrity and management; (e) analyzing data using inductive thematic analysis; and (f) applying reflexivity protocols to mitigate researcher bias (see Yin, 2018).

As a student in human services, I had personal experience with the phenomenon under study, having completed coursework in both traditional face-to-face and online formats. I found that while some courses were well-suited to virtual learning, others were not. This observation motivated my decision to explore other students' experiences to deepen the understanding of how modality influences engagement in human services coursework. To reduce the potential for researcher bias, I excluded any students with whom I had shared coursework. Consequently, none of the participants were personally known to me.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexivity practices to minimize bias. Reflexivity involves the researcher critically reflecting on how their values, opinions, and worldviews influence decisions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation

(Olaghere, 2022). To support this effort, participants were selected from diverse geographic locations and graduate programs, with the common criterion of having completed both traditional and online coursework in human services. I practiced ongoing reflexivity by journaling before and after key research activities, including participant selection, development of the interview protocol, and data collection and analysis (McGrath, 2021). In addition, I used analytic memos during the coding and analysis phases. These practices supported the integrity of the research and helped reduce the potential for bias in interpreting participants' experiences.

Methodology

In this section, the methodology of the study is related to participant selection logic and instrumentation. I also discuss the procedures for participant recruitment and the procedures for participation, data collection, and data analysis. Specific details are provided to enhance the study's trustworthiness and increase the methodological rigor associated with the study.

Participant Selection Logic

Qualitative researchers serve multiple roles in research studies. They are considered human instruments, gathering data directly from participants (Xu & Storr, 2012). In this study, I served as the primary investigator and fulfilled several responsibilities: (a) selecting the research methodology and design, (b) recruiting, sampling, and enrolling participants, (c) conducting semistructured interviews, (d) ensuring data integrity and management, (e) analyzing data using inductive thematic

analysis, and (f) applying reflexivity protocols to mitigate researcher bias (see Yin, 2018).

As a student in human services, I had personal experience with the phenomenon under study, having completed coursework in both traditional face-to-face and online formats. I found that while some courses were well-suited to virtual learning, others were not. This observation motivated my decision to explore other students' experiences to deepen the understanding of how modality influences engagement in human services coursework. To reduce the potential for researcher bias, I excluded any students with whom I had shared coursework. Consequently, none of the participants were personally known to me.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexivity practices to minimize bias. Reflexivity involves the researcher critically reflecting on how their values, opinions, and worldviews influence decisions, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Olaghere, 2022). To support this effort, participants were selected from diverse geographic locations and graduate programs, with the common criterion of having completed both traditional and online human services coursework. I practiced ongoing reflexivity by journaling before and after key research activities, including participant selection, interview protocol development, and data collection and analysis (see McGrath, 2021). In addition, I used analytic memos during the coding and analysis phases. These practices supported the integrity of the research and helped reduce the potential for bias in interpreting participants' experiences.

Instrumentation

The instrument I used in this study was a semistructured interview guide comprising key questions about participants' experiences with graduate-level traditional and online learning in human services. The interview protocol was developed based on key concepts from the literature and the theoretical framework (see Appendix C). Demographic questions were also included to describe the essential characteristics of the sample and enhance transferability. The interview questions addressed participants' educational backgrounds, experiences with human services graduate studies, and their experiences in both traditional and online graduate classes. The protocol was also used to explore participants' perspectives on human services education through the lens of social learning theory. The interview protocol was reviewed by my dissertation chair and committee to ensure it appropriately addressed the research question. Feedback from the committee was incorporated into the final version of the protocol. This procedure helped ensure that the data collection instrument was sufficient to address the study's research question.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

This section is divided into three subsections. First, I describe the procedures used to recruit and select participants. Second, I address the procedures for participation in the study. Third, the data collection procedures are discussed.

Procedures for Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) posted to the Walden participant pool and on popular social media pages, including Facebook. The

specified audience was graduate students in human services. Recruitment of participants through social media offers advantages in terms of time, cost, and response rates (Lehdonvirta et al., 2021). The inclusion criteria for the study were included on the social media recruitment flyer. The flyer contained a QR code with a link to the participant screening questionnaire, which prompted potential participants to answer screening questions and provide contact information if they wished to receive more information about the study. Once contacted, I provided each eligible candidate with an informed consent form via email. Candidates were asked to review and complete the informed consent form if they wished to participate in the study. Informed consent was required prior to scheduling interviews. Participants confirmed their consent by replying to the emailed consent form with the words "I consent" in the body of the email.

Procedures for Participation

I used Calendly to schedule the interviews at a date and time that was mutually convenient for each participant and myself. Additionally, when contacted by phone, I reviewed the inclusion criteria with the potential participant. If the criteria were met, I emailed the consent form and scheduled the interview during the call. One-on-one interviews were conducted via Zoom to ensure ease and flexibility in scheduling. Virtual interviews are appropriate for direct engagement with study participants (Gray et al., 2020). I conducted all interviews, asked open-ended questions, moderated the sessions, and sought clarification when necessary. Prompting questions were added when a participant's answer was incomplete or lacked sufficient depth.

Data Collection Procedures

The interviews were recorded with the participants' consent. The audio recordings were transcribed using Zoom's recording function. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to allow time for participants to expand on their ideas. Before and immediately after each interview, I journaled to ensure reflexivity and took field notes to capture essential impressions or changes in tone. Audio recordings were uploaded to Otter.ai, an AI-based online transcription service.

Transcription accuracy is critical in qualitative research, as transcriptions serve as the data source for thematic analysis (Jenkins et al., 2023). To ensure transcription accuracy, I compared the transcripts line-by-line with the audio recordings and corrected any AI-derived inaccuracies. After verifying the transcriptions, I completed member checking. For member checking, I compiled short summaries of my interpretation of each participant's answers to the interview questions, following the guidance of Candela (2019). I emailed these summaries to individual participants and asked for clarification or confirmation of my interpretations. Member checking served as an essential quality control mechanism to enhance the accuracy of my interpretations and ensure data congruency (Candela, 2019). Once the interview sessions were complete and the participants had member-checked my interpretations, each audio recording and interview transcript was saved using pseudonyms P1, P2, …, and P10 to maintain confidentiality and safeguard participants' personal information (see Hamilton & Finley, 2019). Data collection was considered complete once all interview transcripts had been pseudonymized and member-checked.

There were two mechanisms by which participants could exit the study. First, a participant could ask to be removed from the study. If this occurred, I would have destroyed all information gathered from the participant, including the participant's screening questionnaire, informed consent form, audio recording, and interview transcription. Second, upon successfully completing the semistructured interview, participants were exited from the study through a debriefing protocol incorporated into the interview protocol (see Appendix C). Specifically, I debriefed participants immediately after the semistructured interview. During the debrief, I reminded participants of the purpose of the study and reviewed the procedures I followed to ensure their confidentiality. I also summarized the key concepts of the study and asked if they had any additional comments. Upon completing data analysis, I sent each participant a one-page summary of their coded data for member checking (see Candela, 2019).

Data Analysis Plan

To analyze the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase guide for thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing large amounts of textual data derived from qualitative sources (Nowell et al., 2017). To facilitate the analysis and thematic coding process, I used NVivo Version 14, a qualitative data analysis software. Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-step method was followed, which included: (a) familiarization with the data, (b) generating initial codes, (c) axial categorization, (d) extracting themes, (e) reviewing, defining, and naming themes, and (f) holistically reflecting on the data analysis.

Phase 1 involved familiarization with the collected data. I became familiar with the interview data by reading and re-reading the transcripts multiple times. As recommended by Braun and Clarke (2021), transcripts were read thoroughly to gather both initial impressions and deeper insights. Each interview was read in its entirety, followed by a focused reading of responses to each individual interview question (IQ), such as all responses to IQ1, then IQ2, and so on until all IQs had been reviewed. I also engaged in member checking during this phase. I summarized my interpretation of each participant's responses and emailed them these summaries for confirmation or clarification (see Candela, 2019).

Phase 2 was the coding phase. During this phase, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo Version 14 and assigned short descriptors, or codes (Saldaña, 2021), to key participant ideas and insights. Coding allowed me to reduce the large volume of data into a more manageable set of descriptors while preserving meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Phase 3 consisted of axial categorization. Axial categories are small-scale patterns formed by grouping similar codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I formed these categories using pattern recognition techniques. I conducted familiarization, coding, and axial categorization concurrently with data collection and member checking. This co-collection and analysis process allowed me to evaluate data saturation throughout the study (Guest et al., 2020). After all interviews were completed, member-checked, and codes placed into axial categories, I moved on to Phase 4.

Phase 4 involved the extraction of themes. Themes represent large-scale patterns in qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I created themes by combining axial

categories based on shared patterns. I also identified discrepant cases during this phase. Discrepant cases were defined as codes that applied uniquely to a single participant's responses (Booth et al., 2013). Phase 5 focused on reviewing and refining the themes. I constructed a thematic map to illustrate the relationships among codes, axial categories, and themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2021). I reviewed this map to identify redundant or overlapping themes and consolidated them when appropriate. I also evaluated whether any new, higher-order themes could be developed from related ones. Phase 6 involved a holistic reflection on the entire dataset. I ensured that each theme logically and coherently addressed the research question and aligned with the participants' experiences. This final step provided a comprehensive interpretation of the data that supported the overall findings of the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

The rigor of qualitative research is assessed using measures of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness comprises four elements: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These four elements, when combined, produce confidence in the research procedures and results in qualitative studies. Methods used to address each element of trustworthiness are described in the following subsections.

Credibility

Credibility referred to how well the study's findings accurately represented the experiences of participants in the sample under study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility is akin to internal validity in quantitative studies (Johnson et al., 2020). The credibility of the study's findings was promoted through deep engagement, thick

description, narrative truth, and the identification of discrepant cases. Deep engagement involved allowing sufficient time to listen to participants, document the data, and achieve data saturation (Ellingson & Sotirin, 2020). Thick description was established by capturing the context of participants' educational experiences in a rich and detailed manner (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020). This was supported by including demographic questions about participants' educational experiences within the semistructured interviews (see Appendix D). Narrative truth was promoted in two ways. First, verbatim quotations were used to represent participants' ideas and support key assertions. Second, participants were given the opportunity to confirm or clarify my interpretations of their responses through member checking (see Candela, 2019). Finally, discrepant cases were identified to enhance narrative truth by providing rival explanations and perspectives (Booth et al., 2013).

Transferability

Transferability referred to the degree to which findings were applicable to policy, practice, and future research, or the extent to which the results of the qualitative study applied to other people or contexts (Hays & McKibben, 2021). Transferability is akin to the external validity of quantitative studies. Transferability was enhanced through the use of thick description and sampling sufficiency. Thick description involved providing background data to establish the context of the study's phenomenon and participants (Hong & Cross Francis, 2020), allowing readers to assess the similarity of other contexts (Hays & McKibben, 2021). Sampling sufficiency referred to both the sample size and the appropriateness of the selected participants (Lakens, 2022). Participants were chosen

using inclusion criteria designed to ensure that they were knowledgeable about the study's central phenomenon. The study was conducted until data saturation was reached, further supporting sampling sufficiency and enhancing transferability.

Dependability

Dependability referred to the degree to which research procedures were documented and reliable (Johnson et al., 2020). Several methodological choices were made to enhance dependability, including the use of an audit trail, careful documentation of the evidence, and detailed reporting of the data analysis process. An audit trail is the documentation of the inquiry process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Documenting participant interactions, data collection activities, and data analysis procedures through an audit trail enhanced dependability by increasing the transparency of the research process (Carcary, 2020). The audit trail included documentation of the participants' informed consent forms, semistructured interview recordings, and transcripts derived from the audio recordings. Records were also maintained detailing the methods used to derive the axial categories and themes identified in the study. A copy of the study's codebook was included in an appendix of the final dissertation. Like the audit trail, providing the codebook, the development of the coding schemes, and documentation of primary and secondary codes, categories, and themes enhanced the dependability of the study's results (Johnson et al., 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability referred to the objectivity or the ability of others to confirm or corroborate the research study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was

enhanced by providing ample evidence to support claims, documenting and discussing discrepant cases, and offering an in-depth methodological description of the study (Johnson et al., 2020). Verbatim quotations from participants were used to establish the relationships between codes, axial categories, and themes. Discrepant cases, when present, were documented and discussed in the study's presentation of results.

Confirmability was also promoted through researcher reflexivity and acknowledgment of the investigator's beliefs, assumptions, and biases. Researcher reflexivity involved maintaining awareness of how results unfolded and documenting emerging patterns (Olaghere, 2022). Reflexivity protocols were incorporated throughout the study, including journaling before and after each research-related activity (see McGrath, 2021). These methods promoted the confirmability of the study's findings.

Ethical Procedures

All studies present some level of risk to participants. Researchers must take the necessary precautions to ensure that participants are protected throughout all stages of the research process (Johnson et al., 2020). To ensure the subjects' well-being, the study adhered to the highest ethical standards throughout. The Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) clearly outlines the process for meeting ethical standards in research. Researchers must follow three ethical principles as described in the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

Respect for persons involves treating research participants with respect and autonomy (Traianou & Hammersley, 2021). Respect for persons was upheld through the

informed consent process. Participants were provided with informed consent forms that described the benefits and risks associated with participating in the study (Appendix C), allowing for their voluntary participation. The Belmont Report's principle of beneficence states that people should act in a way that benefits others while also protecting the safety and welfare of research participants (Pritchard, 2021). The principle of beneficence was upheld by obtaining clearance from Walden University's IRB prior to conducting the study. The IRB ensured that participants were not harmed as a result of participation and that the research methods were ethical and appropriate. Beauchamp (2008) noted that the principle of justice ensures that all participants have a fair chance to participate in the study. As part of the semistructured interview process, all participants had an equal opportunity to share their experiences.

Before conducting this research, I obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Per FDA regulations, the IRB reviewed and approved all Walden University research involving human subjects. The IRB ensured the study met ethical standards before data collection began (Osborne & Luoma, 2018). I provided participants with informed consent forms and invitation letters to formally enroll in the study. Participants received informed consent forms that explained the nature of the study and my plans to maintain their confidentiality. Additionally, I informed participants that they were free to discontinue their participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Once the study was completed, I informed the participants of any potential risks or benefits that might result from their participation. For confidentiality purposes, I did not disclose the schools at which participants completed their human services education, and

all study files used pseudonyms to protect participant identities. I informed all participants of the mechanisms I used to safeguard their confidentiality and privacy.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers. Chapter 3 with an introduction highlighting the need for the present study by reviewing the research question of the study. I discussed the qualitative research methodology chosen for the study. I explained why a qualitative methodology and a descriptive research design were deemed appropriate for the study. I also explained why quantitative and mixed methodologies were not chosen for the study. Next, I described the role of the researcher in the study and described my positionality, as well as reflexivity protocols that will be utilized to mitigate researcher bias.

The chapter discussed the methodologies I will utilize to select participants and collect and analyze data. During this discussion, I reviewed the inclusion criteria that will be utilized to select participants and ensure their eligibility for the study. After a detailed discussion of the research methodology, I reviewed issues of trustworthiness by discussing procedures to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study. Finally, I discussed the ethical considerations of the study and reviewed the steps that will be taken to protect the participants' confidentiality. In the

next chapter, I will present the data collected for this study, detailing the data collection methods. I will provide an in-depth analysis and interpretation of my findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Graduate-level students often face unique challenges when navigating different learning environments, especially when transitioning between online and traditional classroom settings. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have completed both online and traditional courses describe their educational experiences. A specific aim of the study was to understand students' perceptions of engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and the nature of peer and faculty connections. The following research question guided this inquiry:

RQ1: How do graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers?

The research question was addressed through semistructured interviews with human resources students who completed coursework in both traditional and online formats.

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from interviews with participants who had experienced both learning modalities. The chapter begins by describing the research setting and participant demographics, followed by a detailed account of the data collection and data analysis procedures. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness are then presented. The final section introduces the study's results, organized into four major themes that reflect how students engaged with material, connected with peers and

professors, managed learning challenges, and benefited from each instructional format. Participant quotes and interpretive analysis support each theme.

Setting

Following IRB approval (IRB 10-15-24-0996419, awarded on 10/15/2024), a recruitment flyer was distributed through social media and professional networking platforms. The flyer invited graduate-level human services students who had completed both traditional and online graduate courses to participate in the study. A total of 18 responses from potential participants were received at different intervals following the initial posting. The first participant responded within 48 hours, and the final participant responded approximately 3 weeks later.

The recruitment flyer instructed interested individuals to initiate contact via email to express interest. Each prospective participant was screened to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. Twelve individuals met the criteria and were invited to participate. All eligible participants were emailed an informed consent form. Participants typically responded within 24–48 hours with written confirmation by replying "I consent." Once consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled at dates and times convenient for each participant. Data saturation was observed after eight interviews, and two additional interviews were conducted to ensure thematic redundancy was fully achieved.

Data Collection

Data collection began after I scheduled individual interviews with the 12 participants who met the inclusion criteria for this study. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, a secure videoconferencing platform. This approach allowed for flexibility and

accessibility for participants located across various geographic regions. Each interview was planned for approximately one hour and followed a semistructured format guided by an interview protocol.

Before beginning the interviews, I reminded participants not to share any personally identifiable information beyond what was required to answer the interview questions. No data disclosed during the interviews could reasonably be used to identify any participant. Consequently, no redaction of the transcripts was necessary. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym in the form of a participant identification number (P1, P2, …, P12) to maintain the participants' confidentiality. These identifiers were assigned in the order interviews were completed. Any individual who initially expressed interest but did not provide informed consent was not assigned a participant number and was excluded from the study.

Prior to each interview, I confirmed that the participant consented to audio recording and data usage for research purposes. All participants provided verbal consent. I used Zoom's built-in recording function to capture each interview. The interview protocol ensured consistency across all participants, though I used occasional follow-up and clarifying questions to encourage elaboration and maintain a conversational tone. I also took field notes during each interview to support researcher reflexivity and capture impressions regarding tone, emphasis, and emotional nuance, particularly as participants reflected on their experiences with student engagement, learning environments, and peer or faculty interaction.

The transcription process was completed in multiple stages. I used Otter.ai, a secure online transcription service, to generate initial transcripts. Each transcript was then reviewed line by line while listening to the original audio recording to ensure accuracy. Upon completion of transcription, I conducted a transcript review process consistent with Rowlands (2021), emailing each participant a copy of their respective transcript for review. Participants were asked to acknowledge receipt within one days and return any corrections or comments within one week. All participants responded, and none requested revisions to their transcripts. This process enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of the data collection process.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide for thematic analysis was followed. This structured method helped me identify, review, and define patterns in the participants' descriptions of their experiences in both online and traditional learning environments.

Phase 1: Familiarization with the Data

I began by transcribing the audio-recorded interviews and reviewing each transcript multiple times to immerse myself in the data. I annotated meaningful expressions and noted recurring ideas regarding classroom engagement, knowledge application, and interpersonal relationships. The transcription process also allowed me to begin noting early patterns and outliers. For example, it became clear that participants frequently contrasted the self-directed nature of online learning with the collaborative structure of traditional classrooms. Several students emphasized the flexibility and

autonomy of online formats, while others repeatedly expressed a sense of social disconnection in these settings. These recurring contrasts signaled the presence of thematic divisions that would later guide the development of the major themes. Additionally, I observed repeated expressions of emotional responses, such as isolation, stress, or encouragement, which pointed to the affective dimensions of learning and the importance of social presence in both environments. These early observations shaped my initial reflections on how different modalities influence not just academic outcomes, but also the holistic learning experience.

Phase 2: Coding

The second phase in Braun and Clarke's (2006) method is coding. Using both manual coding techniques and NVivo software, I generated 116 initial codes (Appendix D). These codes served as short descriptors that captured the essence of each segment of participant input, preserving the language and intent of the speakers. To ensure fidelity to the data, I prioritized breadth over specificity during this phase, casting a wide net to include all meaningful aspects of the participants' experiences. Examples of initial codes included "limited peer interaction," "engagement through discussion boards," "modeling behavior," "flexibility in online learning," and "time zone barriers."

Bandura and Walter's (1977) social learning theory influenced how I developed and recognized codes related to observation, imitation, and interpersonal dynamics. For instance, comments that emphasized learning through watching others, such as mimicking professor demonstrations or peer presentations, were coded under "modeling behavior," a central construct in social learning theory. Similarly, statements involving

collaborative engagement, peer feedback, and social reinforcement were captured through codes like "peer encouragement," "cohort support," and "discussion as learning." By applying this framework, I was attuned to the mechanisms through which participants described their cognitive, behavioral, and affective learning across modalities.

In addition to applying theoretical sensitivity, I documented analytic memos throughout the coding process to capture emerging patterns, contradictions, and preliminary interpretations. This reflexive approach supported consistency and transparency, helping to trace the interpretive path from raw transcript to initial codes. Importantly, I remained critically self-aware of my own assumptions, including a tendency to be skeptical about the efficacy of online learning compared to traditional instruction. To manage this bias, I made a deliberate effort to approach all participant comments with neutrality, giving equal attention to affirming and critical perspectives about online formats. For instance, when coding statements that emphasized autonomy and skill development in online environments, I resisted minimizing those insights and instead considered them in light of the focus on social learning theory on self-regulation and cognitive modeling. This process helped ensure that the codes were grounded in the participants' experiences rather than filtered through my preconceptions. These 127 initial codes provided the foundational structure for deeper analysis and subsequent theme construction.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

The third phase in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis is searching for themes. In the next step, I organized the 127 initial codes into 30 secondary codes by

consolidating similar ideas and clustering related participant experiences (See Appendix E). This phase required comparing codes across transcripts and identifying commonalities that transcended individual narratives. For instance, codes such as “time zone barriers,” “disjointed group collaboration,” and “difficulty coordinating schedules” were merged into the secondary code *asynchronous engagement challenges,* reflecting shared difficulties participants faced when attempting to collaborate without real-time interaction. Similarly, “self-discipline,” “working ahead,” and “setting personal deadlines” were unified under the secondary code *autonomous learning habits*, capturing how students independently managed their progress in the absence of structured schedules. Another example includes the fusion of “lack of peer rapport,” “no group formation,” and “minimal connection” into the secondary code, *online peer isolation*. These combinations preserved the individual responses while surfacing broader patterns.

To ensure rigor, I conducted iterative reviews of the secondary codes, comparing them across participants and evaluating how well each cluster reflected shared meanings. Through this process, I condensed the 22 secondary codes into nine axial categories that synthesized the core domains of student experience. These categories represented recurring patterns in how participants navigated instructional settings, engaged with peers and faculty, and experienced the benefits and constraints of online and traditional formats. Notably, the axial categories aligned with theoretical constructs from social learning theory, such as observational learning, reciprocal interaction, and self-regulation, offering a bridge between participants’ experiences and the study’s theoretical foundations.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

In the fourth phase of thematic analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006) recommended reviewing themes, categories, and codes. Each category was reviewed and refined through multiple coding cycles to enhance precision and ensure conceptual clarity. During this recursive process, I returned to the raw data to assess whether each code-to-category alignment accurately reflected participant intent and meaning. I scrutinized the language used by participants and asked whether the categories captured not only what was said but also how and why certain sentiments were emphasized. I revisited transcripts to test the fit of excerpts within their assigned categories and to ensure that categories were mutually exclusive where appropriate, yet flexible enough to reflect complex, overlapping ideas.

Phase 5: Naming and Organizing Themes

In the fifth phase, I used an iterative review to synthesize the nine axial categories into four overarching themes, each aligned with the study's purpose of exploring how graduate-level human services students experience online and traditional coursework, particularly in relation to classroom engagement, knowledge application, and peer or instructor interaction. This thematic framework also responded directly to the research question, guiding the interpretive phase of analysis. I labeled each theme based on shared patterns and conceptual coherence, and in some cases, subdivided themes to reflect distinct but related dimensions of participant experience.

Theme 1 explored how online and traditional learning involve different forms of engagement. The theme was developed from two axial categories, reflecting differences

in engagement between online and traditional students. Thus, the categories separated the themes into two subthemes related to how students engaged with the academic material online and in traditional classrooms. Theme 1A was developed to explore how online courses promote individual engagement with the material. Mechanisms of individual engagement included working independently through discussion boards (P1, P2, P4, P5, P9, and P11), written instructor feedback (P2, P6, and P12), self-teaching (P3 and P4), and using assigned texts and lecture materials (P5, P10, and P12). Theme 1B explored how students in traditional courses describe engagement, which was identified as collaborative. Collaborative mechanisms identified included in-class discussions and peer debate (P2, P3, P7, P8, P10, P11, and P12), direct engagement with instructors (P2, P3, P5, P6, and P7), modeling peers and instructors (P2, P3, P4), and hands-on learning (P4, P6, P10, and P12) valued the hands-on opportunities in face-to-face classes to practice skills in real time.

Theme 2 explored relational engagement in academic environments, focusing on how students interacted with peers and instructors in both online and traditional settings. This theme identified patterns in peer and faculty engagement across various learning formats. In Theme 2A, peer engagement and social support across learning environments were explored, identifying limited peer engagement in online classes (P1, P2, P4, P6, and P12) and collaborative bonds and peer support in traditional classrooms (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P9, P10, P11, and P12). Theme 2B explored instructor accessibility and instructional presence. Online students (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8, and P12) described their instructors as flexible and willing to schedule time for support. Students in traditional

classrooms (P2, P5, P6, P9, P10, and P12) valued the ability to drop by instructors' offices or ask questions after class.

Theme 3 examined the challenges students faced in both online and traditional learning environments, focusing on structural, interpersonal, and motivational barriers. Theme 3A explored disconnection and self-direction in online courses, evidenced by limited interaction with peers and instructors (P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P12), misunderstandings in written communication (P2, P4, P5, P8, and P11), and distractions, time zone conflicts, and delayed feedback hindered learning (P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, and P10). Theme 3B addressed constraints within traditional learning formats. Participants described challenges related to time management, childcare, commuting, and fixed schedules (P2, P3, P4, and P5), as well as limited access to resources (P5, P12) and concerns regarding bias in face-to-face classes (P5, P8).

Theme 4 examined the perceived benefits of both online and traditional learning formats, highlighting how each modality supports student growth, flexibility, and academic performance in distinct ways. Theme 4A focused on flexibility and personal growth in online learning (P2, P3, P4, P5, and P8), the development of self-discipline and autonomy (P2, P3, P5, and P6), and improvements in writing and technological proficiency (P5, P6, P7, and P10). Theme 4B highlighted the structure, connection, and accountability provided by traditional learning, with participants describing stronger motivation to prepare for class and avoid procrastination (P2, P3, and P8), rich peer and faculty engagement (P3, P5, and P6), interpersonal skill development (P5, P6), and the formation of long-term relationships (P3, P5).

Phase 6: Writing the Final Report

In the final phase, I synthesized the findings into rich thematic narratives that integrated direct quotations from participants to illustrate key points. Each theme was carefully constructed to reflect patterns across the data and to address the study's central purpose and research question, exploring how graduate-level human services students perceive and experience online and traditional learning, particularly regarding engagement, knowledge application, and interpersonal connection. The use of verbatim quotes ensured that the participants' voices remained central to the interpretation, grounding the analysis in authentic lived experience. By following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method, I developed a coherent and rigorous thematic framework that not only shaped the organization of the results chapter but also provided a detailed and meaningful account of the complexities of student engagement across learning modalities and environments.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of this qualitative study, I implemented multiple strategies aligned with Lincoln and Guba's (1985) four criteria for trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria provide a structured framework for evaluating the quality and reliability of qualitative research. Each strategy was chosen to enhance the transparency of the research process and to ensure the findings authentically reflected participants' experiences. Collectively, these methods strengthened confidence in the study's conclusions about student engagement across online and traditional learning environments.

Credibility

Credibility is the degree to which the study accurately represents participants' experiences. To promote credibility, I engaged deeply with participants throughout the research process. Each interview was conducted using a consistent, semistructured guide, and I allowed participants sufficient time to expand on their responses. I reviewed transcripts multiple times during the analysis and achieved data saturation after 12 interviews, ensuring that the findings were grounded in rich, comprehensive accounts. This repeated engagement with the data also helped identify patterns of engagement across learning modalities that might have otherwise been overlooked.

I also used thick description by incorporating the breadth of the participants' educational experiences. These contextual details helped clarify the circumstances under which various themes emerged. To support narrative truth, I included verbatim quotations throughout the chapter, ensuring that participants' voices were central to the presentation of themes. This detailed representation of student experiences strengthens the transferability of the findings to similar educational settings or student populations.

I also conducted member checking by emailing each participant a copy of their transcript and inviting them to confirm, clarify, or amend any part of their account. All participants who responded confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts, strengthening the interpretive integrity of the findings. I also recorded and reflected on discrepant cases, documenting where a participant's experience deviated from the dominant patterns, to ensure that diverse perspectives were represented and not glossed over. This process

contributed to both credibility and confirmability by ensuring that interpretations were balanced, inclusive, and responsibly drawn from the data.

Transferability

To enhance transferability**,** or the extent to which the findings could be relevant to other contexts, I used purposeful sampling to select participants with direct experience in both online and traditional graduate-level human services courses. Participants varied by age, background, and professional experience, which added to the richness and potential relevance of the results. This diversity enabled a more comprehensive understanding of how different learners engage with and are affected by varying instructional environments. Including a wide range of perspectives strengthens the applicability of the findings to other programs with similarly diverse student bodies.

I achieved thick description by detailing participant demographics, course delivery formats, and the environments in which learning occurred. These detailed accounts enable readers to assess whether the findings can be applied to other populations or educational settings. The use of rich, contextual information helps establish external validity by illustrating how and why specific patterns emerged. I also conducted interviews until no new themes emerged, ensuring sampling sufficiency and bolstering the potential for transferability to other graduate student populations in human services and similar fields.

Dependability

I enhanced dependability by thoroughly documenting the research process. I maintained a complete audit trail, which included records of participant recruitment,

interview scheduling, consent forms, raw transcripts, analytic memos, and email correspondence. I also kept clear documentation of how codes, categories, and themes were derived from the data, providing transparency at every stage. Each step of the data collection and analysis process was indexed to ensure that decisions could be traced and reviewed by an external auditor if needed.

To increase transparency, I created and refined a comprehensive codebook that traced the reduction of 127 initial codes were reduced through successive analytic stages to 22 secondary codes, nine axial categories, and four overarching themes. I used both manual coding and NVivo software to track changes, review patterns, and ensure consistency across data segments. This iterative process was guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase model and integrated both inductive coding strategies and theoretical constructs from social learning theory. Taken together, this documentation ensures that the analytic process can be audited or replicated by future researchers seeking to validate or extend the findings.

Confirmability

To establish confirmability, or the extent to which the findings were shaped by the participants rather than researcher bias, I used multiple strategies. First, I supported all thematic claims with verbatim quotes from the interviews, making the interpretive process transparent and anchored in the participants' own words. Quotations were carefully selected to illustrate both common and divergent experiences, allowing readers to trace how each theme emerged directly from participant narratives. Using direct

evidence promoted analytic neutrality and ensured that claims were grounded in the experiences of the participants rather my preconceptions or assumptions.

I also engaged in reflexivity throughout the study. I maintained a reflexive journal in which I recorded my thoughts, decisions, and potential biases before and after interviews and during coding. I was especially mindful of my own skepticism about the effectiveness of online learning and documented moments where I needed to set aside assumptions to engage with participants' perspectives fully. These reflexive memos helped ensure that the analysis remained participant-driven and not overly influenced by preconceived notions. By consistently monitoring my reactions, I was able to critically evaluate the extent to which my interpretations aligned with the data and upheld the principle of analytic integrity.

I acknowledged and incorporated discrepant cases into the analysis. When the participants' experiences did not align with the emerging patterns, I examined those outliers closely and integrated them into the findings to preserve the complexity and nuance of the data. Including these variations helped prevent the homogenization of participant voices and reinforced the credibility and authenticity of the reported themes. This attention to detail further strengthened the study's confirmability by ensuring that alternative perspectives were valued and transparently represented

Results

The following section presents the findings of the study based on interviews with students enrolled in human services programs who had taken both online and traditional courses. Analysis of the data yielded four central themes that explain how participants

experienced and responded to different learning modalities. These themes capture how students engaged with course content, peers, and instructors; the challenges they faced; and the benefits they gained from each modality. Each theme is presented with illustrative quotes and interpretive analysis to reflect both commonalities and variation across participants.

Theme 1: Online and Traditional Learning Involve Different Forms of Engagement

Participants described how the format of a course shaped the way they engaged with course content, instructors, and peers. Online environments fostered independent learning, encouraging students to manage their own schedules, interpret material individually, and engage asynchronously with classmates. In contrast, traditional settings promoted collaborative and interpersonal engagement, offering more real-time dialogue, shared experiences, and opportunities for informal learning. These different modalities activated distinct strengths in students and influenced how they connected academically with the material and socially with each other.

Theme 1A: Online Courses Promote Individual Engagement with the Material

The participants described how online learning fostered individual engagement primarily through self-directed study, independent exploration of peers' responses, and personal interpretation of course materials. Rather than depending on real-time dialogue, students in online courses engaged by deeply reading classmates' posts and synthesizing their ideas with the course content. For example, P1 explained, "I like to read their responses thoroughly to see how they are interpreting the readings that our professors present to us." P11 also noted, "I learned and engaged with them based on their questions

and answers," suggesting that engagement stemmed from analyzing and reflecting on others' perspectives, not necessarily interacting in real time. These insights demonstrate that asynchronous platforms can foster critical thinking through observation, interpretation, and analysis of peer input. When participants encountered confusing assignments, some relied on classmates' posts to gain clarity. P4 stated, "I would wait to see what other people posted. That was helpful to me because I would see what they were writing." This demonstrates how individual engagement with peer contributions enabled participants to process challenging content and reduce ambiguity in the absence of direct instruction.

Other participants described how reading classmates' posts not only clarified content but also enriched their understanding by exposing them to diverse problem-solving strategies. P5 explained, "Watching other people complete their tasks and how they approach their tasks has given me a broader, more comprehensive view of solving problems." This form of indirect engagement supported independent learning by offering multiple models for approaching assignments. P9 echoed this process, stating, "I like to, you know, thoroughly read their responses to see how they are interpreting the readings that our professors present to us." Both participants emphasized the cognitive benefits of observing others' reasoning, which encouraged reflection and informed their own academic strategies. These examples illustrate how asynchronous interaction in online courses nurtured individual agency, allowing learners to engage at their own pace while still benefiting from peer insight and collective learning.

In addition to peer-generated content, participants emphasized that professors' feedback served as a key form of academic engagement in online environments. The asynchronous format required instructors to provide feedback that was not only corrective but also facilitative of deeper learning. P2 reflected, "They typically give you feedback, which is a technique that allows me to know if I'm grasping what is being taught or introduced to the class." Similarly, P6 appreciated targeted online feedback, stating, "When you're doing something with your papers or your assignments, and your professor pulls you to the side and says 'You should have gone into more detail,' I think that kind of feedback online is great." These comments suggest that detailed commentary plays a crucial role in helping students self-correct, internalize learning objectives, and achieve academic growth over time. Instructor guidance thus functions as a personal touchpoint in otherwise independent learning experiences.

Participants also discussed how online learning encouraged them to become self-reliant and proactive in their engagement. Some felt empowered by the freedom to learn at their own pace, while others found the lack of structured interaction challenging. P3 expressed frustration with the solitary nature of online learning, saying, "There was no engagement. I felt like I was self-teaching. There's nothing online. It's strictly work." P4 shared a similar view, noting, "I haven't been taught. I've been given a thing, told to do it, and then I get feedback." These statements reflect that self-teaching was both a necessity and a defining feature of engagement in online learning environments. However, despite the drawbacks, several participants developed persistence and self-guided problem-solving skills as they adapted to the demands of digital learning.

Several participants described how the independent structure of online learning cultivated persistence, self-reliance, and problem-solving abilities over time. Rather than viewing the lack of direct instruction as a barrier, some students adopted resourceful strategies to stay engaged and manage their learning. P10 described a personal commitment to staying on track, stating, “I do everything I can to ensure I complete the recommended or suggested readings in the classroom readings assigned by the instructor.” This discipline reflected an internalized sense of accountability and a recognition that learning required active participation rather than passive completion of assignments. Similarly, P5 highlighted the role of digital resources in enhancing engagement: “The resources and references were the best part of the online courses that engaged me. It’s almost like creating a little library of information about that one topic.” The materials empowered students to expand their knowledge independently, thereby increasing their comprehension and ownership of the learning. For students, the online format not only demanded but also reinforced essential skills such as time management, initiative, and digital literacy, which are traits particularly valuable in professional human services roles that involve self-guided learning. These adaptive behaviors suggest that for some students, online learning was a catalyst for developing academic and professional maturity, as well as self-efficacy.

Course materials, such as readings, videos, and online references, also played a central role in shaping engagement in online courses. The participants emphasized that the abundance of reference materials enhanced their understanding by offering multiple entry points into a topic. P5 stated, “The resources and references were the best part of

the online courses. It allows you to engage in a more educated way." P10 reinforced this by sharing, "I do everything I can to ensure I complete the recommended or suggested readings. That's one way of engaging." The participants often appreciated that online courses offered opportunities for repeated access to content, allowing them time to digest and revisit challenging concepts as needed. As P5 explained further, "It's almost like creating a little library. That has a significant impact on engagement." The participant's comments reflect how online learning promotes individualized cognitive engagement through personal control over time, pace, and exposure to content.

Some participants supplemented their online experience through virtual study groups or informal communication tools. P6 noted, "We'd schedule Zoom calls or video calls to go over our work and assignments together," showing that occasional collaboration was possible in an otherwise self-directed environment. P7 shared, "My classmates and I work better with sometimes having a group chat," suggesting that students occasionally created social learning structures informally. However, this was not a universal experience. P8 explained, "I don't engage online, to be honest. I'm focused on doing what I've got to do to get it done." These varied responses indicate that while collaborative opportunities existed, they were often optional and secondary to the core format, which emphasized independent learning.

These findings suggest that online learning fosters individualized engagement by providing flexible pathways for exploration, feedback, and interpretation. The structure supports autonomy, requiring students to rely on internal drive, personal learning strategies, and engagement with asynchronous materials. Students accessed learning

through reading, observation, research, and reflection, often without direct interaction. While some students thrived in this self-paced model, others expressed a need for more guidance or interpersonal connection. In the next section, we explore how traditional classroom settings differ by fostering engagement primarily through real-time collaboration and collective discourse.

Theme 1B: Traditional Courses Promote Collaborative Engagement with Material

Traditional in-person learning environments supported collaborative engagement by creating dynamic spaces for peer-to-peer and student-instructor interaction. The participants overwhelmingly described in-person classes as conducive to interpersonal learning, where they could observe, listen, and physically engage with their learning materials and classmates. P1 explained that being in a traditional setting provided more hands-on opportunities, allowing them to observe material as it was explained, take notes, and engage multiple senses during instruction. P1 said, “It gives me a better opportunity to be hands-on with the learning. It can be very beneficial if you're a hands-on learner, like seeing things written down, seeing further examples, or hearing them being explained to you.” This tactile and visual dimension contributed to a more comprehensive learning experience.

P2, P3, and P11 reinforced that seeing and hearing explanations in person increased clarity and retention when supported by real-time feedback and interactive discussion. P2 explained:

> I'm going to stay in person because I'm a more visual learner. By observing my instructor in each class, I'm able to see them, and not only that, but they're also able to present and introduce concepts in a different manner.

P2's experience highlights the importance of visual observation and in-person demonstrations in enhancing comprehension for students who rely on seeing instructional cues and contextualized examples to fully grasp the material. Similarly, P11 said:

> When you're in person, you can not only have that face-to-face communication with the person, with the instructor, but you're also able to do it in group settings, and then you can do that. You can feed off of others' conversations and learn from others better in person than online.

P2 and P11 emphasized the importance of visual and verbal engagement in the classroom, noting that the physical presence of instructors and peers improved their understanding and participation. These participants had a similar, but slightly different experience from that of P3. P3 said, "My in-person classes are more hands-on, more face-to-face interface. It's more of an opportunity to build a rapport with the teacher, to be a group." While also focused on engagement, P3 emphasized the interpersonal dynamics and sense of community that traditional learning fosters, suggesting that connection and collaboration contribute to deeper academic involvement. These descriptions highlight how traditional environments activate a range of cognitive and sensory learning pathways that are often limited in online settings, especially for learners who benefit from kinesthetic or auditory reinforcement.

Collaborative learning was a central feature of traditional classrooms, with multiple participants emphasizing the relational dynamics of in-person engagement. P3 described the formation of a cohort that supported one another across various classes, enhancing consistency and group encouragement. P3 said, “We do group discussions. We even do group projects. We've done group projects, and we set up a cohort amongst the class to try to get on the same path, stay on this in the same classes, and encourage.” P3’s statement illustrates how peer networks in traditional formats foster continuity, shared learning objectives, and emotional support, all of which contribute to increased engagement and sustained motivation. P2 and P7 also highlighted the value of building relationships with peers through observation, communication, and informal connections outside class. “I learned by observing, communicating, building relationships with my peers, and getting different perspectives.” P2’s remarks reflect the multidimensional nature of traditional learning environments, where interpersonal exchange broadens understanding and cultivates mutual respect. While P2 emphasized active collaboration within the classroom, P7 expanded on how these connections extended into personal rapport, saying:

> Classes in person help you build a better relationship with your peers. I do look forward to seeing them when we meet because I can get my questions answered. You can connect with someone. You're able to talk with them face to face.

Together, P3, P2, and P7 described how in-person learning encourages not just academic engagement but also interpersonal connection, offering both cognitive and emotional

benefits that enrich the overall learning experience. Thus, social interactions found in in-person classrooms cultivated a sense of community and mutual accountability.

Building on these peer dynamics, some participants found that conversations often extended beyond the classroom, occurring in hallways or through study groups, which reinforced the idea that informal learning moments strengthened academic engagement. P8 recalled:

> When I was in an in-person classroom, we talked. We had discussions during class, and if they were really interesting, we'd be talking about it going down the hallway, or we had study groups that I was in that we'd meet in the different conference rooms or whatever and talk about stuff. And that was good. And I missed that.

P8's reflection demonstrates how spontaneous, unstructured discussions enhanced learning by providing space for ongoing intellectual exploration and reinforcing a sense of belonging. Similarly, P10 shared:

> So, when you have a break in a traditional setting that still allows you to collaborate with your peers, it may be about something in the class or on the job. So, still, I feel that being in the same space at the same time, logistics-wise, helps you build a better collaborator.

P10's reflection emphasizes that being physically present enabled serendipitous conversations that bridged academic material and real-world applications, thereby enhancing both content mastery and relational learning. Such peer relationships not only

facilitated academic support but also fostered emotional connection and a shared sense of purpose, which can enhance persistence and satisfaction.

Another key advantage of in-person learning described by participants was direct, personalized engagement with professors. P2, P3, and P6 expressed that instructors in face-to-face settings could detect confusion and respond immediately with clarifications or examples. P2 noted, "In person, your instructor may notice that a particular student is quiet so and may call on them this week, or they may call on them a little more to get me engaged in participating and speaking during class." This observation emphasized the instructor's ability to notice and address subtle cues that might otherwise go unacknowledged in online settings. Similarly, P6 shared:

> I think it's more unified learning. I say that because we can ask questions on the spot and ask for more examples when you're there. It's easier to learn versus not being able to do that at that moment when you have questions.

These observations suggest that in-person engagement allows professors to meet students' academic needs while also supporting their emotional well-being, contributing to a more responsive and humane learning environment.

In addition to personalized support from faculty, participants also emphasized the cognitive benefits of learning alongside peers with diverse experiences and viewpoints. P3 added that in-person learning provides an opportunity to build rapport: "My in-person classes are more hands-on, more face-to-face interface. It's more of an opportunity to build a rapport with the teacher, to be a group." This comment highlights how the physical presence of others encourages relationship-building and fosters an atmosphere of

collaboration that supports academic and social connection. P5 emphasized the value of learning through casual conversations: “I tend to speak more with the teacher or the professor. I can learn a lot that way, too, from basic conversations, and I've seen that my peers also learn that way.” These reflections collectively suggest that students benefit from spontaneous instructional moments and the immediate availability of feedback in traditional classrooms. Such unscripted learning exchanges are difficult to replicate in asynchronous online environments, where spontaneous engagement and nuanced dialogue are often limited.

Building on the theme of personalized academic support, P8 and P10 offered deeper perspectives on faculty interactions, noting that instructors were attuned to students’ emotional states and personal circumstances. P10 shared:

> One thing our professor also would do is watch us. She would study our body language and things of that nature to know if something wasn't quite right. And she'll pull you to the side and ask, you know, what's going on?

This level of care demonstrated the professor’s attention to the holistic well-being of students. Similarly, P8 explained:

> In a classroom setting, they're with you. I say something, they say something. I like that a lot better. If the teacher says something and you don't understand it right away, you can say, ‘Hey, I don't quite get that. Could you explain it a little better?’

P8’s description reveals how immediate clarification and verbal exchange reduce confusion and create a sense of comfort, especially for learners who benefit from

dialogue-based interaction. These narratives illustrate how in-person instruction fosters psychological safety and individualized attention, enabling instructors to build rapport and respond to students' academic and emotional needs in real-time.

Traditional settings enabled students to develop practical, performance-based skills that required real-time feedback and physical presence. P4 described, "We were all trying to learn the clinical aspects of things and how things worked. So they could explain some things in a way that the instructor couldn't for some reason or another, so we could understand it." P6 added, "What motivates me to interact in person is like practical experience." This emphasis on hands-on learning underscores how physical presence facilitates the immediate application of skills in a supportive environment. Similarly, P10 observed, "When I observe classmates, if they are nervous or insecure, sometimes their body language interferes with their presentation. So it taught me to practice being poised and confident in my public speaking." The participants' reflections indicate how in-person classes provided hands-on opportunities to observe, practice, and refine essential professional skills. In traditional environments, students gain real-time feedback not only from instructors but also from peers, supporting development in areas such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork. These examples suggest that traditional courses offer an embodied learning experience that supports the development of soft skills essential to human services professions.

Summary of Theme 1: Engagement with Academic Coursework

Theme 1 explored how online and traditional learning formats shaped student engagement in human services education. Participants consistently identified key

differences in how each modality supported learning interactions and cognitive involvement. Online learning tended to foster self-guided and individualized engagement with course content, while in-person formats facilitated collaborative, relational, and hands-on experiences. These distinctions reveal how each learning environment activates different strengths in students and shapes their pathways to academic and professional development.

The participants described online learning as primarily supporting individual engagement. Many students reported engaging with the material by reading discussion board posts, reviewing classmates' responses, and reflecting independently on course content. Several participants used peer posts to clarify confusing assignments or to gain alternate perspectives on the readings. Instructors' written feedback also served as a tool for individual reflection and progress. Although direct interaction was minimal, students utilized the available materials, including discussion boards, posted resources, and asynchronous feedback, to construct their own understanding and navigate course requirements independently.

The participants described traditional learning environments as promoting collaborative engagement through face-to-face interactions with peers and instructors. Students participated in group discussions, built cohort relationships, and learned from observing classmates during shared classroom experiences. Many emphasized the benefits of immediate instructor support, live demonstrations, and spontaneous conversations. The participants also reported learning from their peers' questions and group activities, as well as applying skills in real-time through practice and observation.

Traditional settings offered opportunities for emotional support, personal connection, and professional skill development through ongoing, direct engagement.

Theme 2: Relational Engagement in Academic Environments is Important

Theme 2 examines how students engaged relationally within their learning environments, focusing on interactions with both peers and professors. The participants described how course modality shaped the depth, spontaneity, and quality of these relationships. In Theme 2A, students reflected on the opportunities and limitations of connecting with classmates in both online and traditional formats, emphasizing the importance of collaboration, study groups, and social support. Theme 2B shifts attention to student-faculty engagement, highlighting how access, feedback, and modeling varied across learning contexts.

Theme 2A: Peer Engagement and Social Support Across Learning Environments

Participants described contrasting experiences of peer engagement in online and traditional learning environments. While online courses offered structured opportunities for interaction through discussion boards and virtual meetings, these engagements were often shaped by course requirements and technological tools. In contrast, traditional classrooms fostered organic and spontaneous connections, allowing students to form deeper relationships through in-person group work, casual conversations, and shared academic experiences. Theme 2a shows how each format influences the depth and nature of peer interaction, with implications for both academic learning and social development.

Structured but Limited Peer Engagement in Online Classes. In the online learning environment, the participants described peer interaction as emerging through

structured requirements, such as discussion boards and mandatory responses. P1 observed, "Online, in most cases, you'll have to respond to a peer or colleague with a question, which forces them to respond back and further explain their topic." P1 contrasted online and in-person settings by emphasizing that asynchronous forums compel interaction that might not occur naturally in a traditional classroom. However, not all online engagement was equally authentic or enthusiastic. P4 explained, "When we're online, we must engage. There were other people who, just like they would in a classroom, were very engaging and very interactive, and others who did the minimum." P4 also noted that less-engaged students were sometimes drawn into deeper discussion when more active classmates intentionally responded to their posts. These dynamics suggest that while engagement can be prompted by course design, its depth varies by individual motivation.

Some students also reported more direct peer interaction through scheduled virtual meetings and structured chatroom functions. P2 shared

> In some instances, we've had weekly virtual meetings to still have personal interactions with each other, including with the whole class. So, we were able to meet just like we were in a class when we were on the actual Zoom, and so that kind of helped out, and we're able to visually talk to each other, ask questions, and bring any topics or resources to the class.

These synchronous exchanges created space for real-time communication that mirrored some aspects of in-person dialogue. Similarly, P4 reflected on earlier stages of her program, recalling that, "We really were able to engage and learn from each other

because we all have different backgrounds and experiences." These accounts suggest that chatrooms and video conferencing can extend student engagement beyond minimum requirements by fostering mutual learning and responsiveness. However, participants also acknowledged that such engagement was not universal or sustained across all phases of their programs, pointing to the variability of peer interaction in online formats.

Collaborative Bonds and Peer Support in Traditional Classrooms. While a few participants noted that traditional classrooms do not automatically foster peer engagement, most described how structured and informal opportunities enabled deeper academic and social bonds. P1, P4, and P9 acknowledged that in-person settings do not guarantee participation. P1 explained, "In-person learning doesn't necessarily encourage you to speak up. It doesn't give you a better opportunity to understand your colleagues and peers." P1's observation indicates that simply being physically present does not ensure interpersonal connection or active involvement. P4 echoed this, observing, "People can just sit and skate by and not participate." P4's statement underscores the potential for disengagement when students are not held accountable for verbal or collaborative contributions. P9 added to the discussion, saying, "You can be in a classroom and not have to speak," highlighting the passive participation that is possible in face-to-face settings. P9's experiences reflect how students can fulfill attendance requirements without engaging intellectually or socially. Despite these limitations, most participants still described richer forms of collaboration and camaraderie in traditional environments compared to online formats.

Group projects emerged as a primary driver of peer engagement in traditional learning environments. P1 explained, “Group projects let you hear their thoughts beyond the classroom, helping you socialize and further understand how the mind can work for different individuals.” P1’s reflections underscore the dual function of group projects in promoting both social connection and cognitive development by exposing students to diverse viewpoints. P2 confirmed this experience, stating, “It was a little easier to build those relationships in person because we were assigned group assignments most of the time.” P2 highlighted how consistent opportunities for collaboration can naturally lead to stronger interpersonal relationships. Group projects encouraged richer academic dialogue but also fostered deeper bonds through shared responsibilities and collective problem-solving. As participants noted, group work helped humanize learning and build rapport in ways that online formats often struggled to replicate.

In addition to promoting connection, in-person collaboration also supported clearer communication and reduced the potential for misinterpretation. P4 emphasized how in-person interaction reduced misunderstandings, explaining, “I could say the same thing in the text, and it will come off as if I'm being mean and snarky.” Her observation highlights the limitations of written communication in online settings, where tone and intent can be easily misinterpreted. P9 similarly appreciated the opportunity to “thoroughly discuss individual thoughts” during group projects, suggesting that traditional settings offer greater space for nuance and clarification. These insights show how traditional classrooms, when structured around collaborative tasks, can foster

understanding through richer verbal and nonverbal cues. Such dynamics enhance learning and promote empathy and cohesion among peers.

Beyond assignments, participants described forming organic study and social groups that offered both academic and emotional support. P1 noted, “It taught me to socialize and ask my peers. You build a study group outside of your regular class hours.” This comment highlights how in-person environments foster initiative and reciprocal learning, particularly in situations where one instructor is responsible for supporting a large number of students. In such contexts, peer collaboration becomes a vital supplement to formal instruction. P2 similarly described how spontaneous conversations after class provided additional learning opportunities, saying, “There may be times when we walk out of the classroom. We were able to discuss anything that we may not understand or any tips or helpful resources that will help us with the course.” These observations demonstrate how learning extends beyond the classroom when students occupy the same physical space and can exchange insights casually. Impromptu exchanges can serve as low-stakes, high-impact learning moments that foster confidence and clarity.

Other participants expanded on how peer relationships developed into intentional support systems. P3 shared, “We were encouraged to set up a cohort. We took notes, studied, and encouraged each other.” This kind of structured peer community created a sense of collective responsibility, encouraging students to stay on track and providing emotional reinforcement throughout the academic term. P4 offered multiple examples of deep peer connection: “We would meet each other before class and after class. We'd have lunch together. We'd meet at each other's houses. We would carpool for the clinicals. It

was very much a cohesive group." P4's description illustrates how traditional learning formats foster close-knit academic communities that blend academic and social aspects, reinforcing the value of consistency, familiarity, and mutual care. P6 echoed this sentiment by noting that being physically present increased comfort and openness to approach classmates. Taken together, these reflections reveal that in-person settings create dynamic social ecosystems where academic and emotional growth co-occur and where students' needs are met by one another. This communal experience appears particularly valuable for human services students who require skill development in empathy, communication, and interdependence.

Participants also emphasized the emotional dimension of peer engagement. P8 recalled forming a friendship after helping a classmate who was struggling, saying, "We got to be better friends as it went along. I said, Well, okay, let's go. We'll go through some stuff." This example illustrates that in-person settings facilitate spontaneous acts of support that enhance both learning and relationships. P11 explained that learning from individuals or group settings helped them "understand better and engage with it better." This suggests that emotional comfort and peer-based learning are closely linked, as feeling supported by others enhances students' willingness to participate and their ability to process information. P3 described their cohort as a "supportive environment" that sustained them through challenges, while P5 emphasized mutual growth: "You and your peers can grow together." These examples illustrate that in-person peer engagement offers students a sense of belonging and a network of encouragement that supports persistence and motivation.

Theme 2B: Instructor Accessibility and Instructional Presence

Building on the previous theme, which explored peer engagement, Theme 2B shifts focus to student experiences with faculty interaction in online and traditional learning environments. Just as peer relationships shaped collaboration and support, participants emphasized that the quality of engagement with professors played a critical role in their academic success. These interactions varied not only by course structure but also by the medium of delivery. While online courses offered flexibility and creative feedback formats, traditional classrooms provided more direct and embodied experiences of modeling and interaction. This sub-theme illustrates how the learning format influences not only students' access to faculty but also the depth, immediacy, and instructional presence embedded in those interactions.

Flexible and Feedback-Oriented Interaction in Online Courses. Online learning environments offer a different type of faculty accessibility that aligns with the demands of adult learners. Participants in online courses emphasized the flexibility and responsiveness of faculty support. P1 shared experiences of professor meetings, saying:

> In online learning, your professors are willing to go ahead and schedule time with you because you can't just walk into their office and say, 'Hey, I need extra assistance.' They're more willing to work with your schedule, understanding that you have other commitments.

This flexibility enabled students to balance work, family, and academics by accommodating their personal schedules. P1 added that such reciprocal respect, where professors acknowledge life demands and students respect professors' availability, helped

sustain the learning relationship. P2 supported this view by saying, “From experience, I'm able to go to my professors better online,” implying that digital communication removed barriers such as physical distance and anxiety about initiating contact. This suggests that online platforms can empower students who may feel hesitant or time-constrained in face-to-face environments by normalizing proactive communication. Asynchronous scheduling and virtual accessibility, when supported by responsive faculty, contribute to a sense of autonomy and respect in the learning process.

Another strength of online learning was the availability of regular, formative feedback. P2 reflected on the structure of asynchronous learning, saying, “Most of the time when we're doing online classes, we have that midweek check-in. That midweek check-in helps prepare me for that quiz.” Feedback functioned as a scaffold for learning, with professors offering quick course corrections or affirmations. This interaction ensured students stayed on track without the need for real-time interaction. P4 also shared a unique case of multimedia feedback, explaining, “She used various methods to give us feedback. She actually did video comments with online screen sharing.” P4 praised this approach as “phenomenal,” noting that visual demonstrations and screen annotations made expectations clearer. While uncommon, this creative use of technology highlighted the potential for personalized digital instruction when instructors were willing to invest time and innovation.

Embodied Presence and Modelling in Traditional Classrooms. In traditional settings, participants emphasized the immediacy of faculty access and the power of embodied modeling. P2 remarked, “In person, I'm able to go to my professor's office and

drop by if I have any questions," reinforcing the benefit of impromptu consultations. This ability to approach instructors without formal scheduling made it easier for students to seek clarification and build rapport. P6 added, "You can ask the professor questions right after class...about the lecture, the coursework, and the assignments." This real-time feedback loop allowed students to address confusion quickly and build familiarity. Similarly, P9 observed that the ability to "physically see [a professor] anytime" made them more approachable, while P10 emphasized that instructors maintained office hours to support students between sessions. These comments suggest that the visibility and proximity of faculty in traditional classrooms fostered a relational dynamic that normalized help-seeking and encouraged informal academic dialogue. These accounts show that traditional learning environments lower the threshold for initiating communication, making help-seeking more seamless.

Several participants described learning through observing and modeling professor behavior. P2 explained, "In face-to-face classes, you can read your professor. That motivates me to want to continue to study." The visual cues and presence of a respected figure inspired academic motivation and persistence. P5 offered a detailed example from a statistics course, where a professor modeled ideal responses and walked students through expectations. They explained, "The way he taught us how to do that was ingenious. That modeling of behavior helped you to learn the meaning of those terms." The structured guidance enabled P5 to develop fluency in a challenging subject through progressive refinement. P7 also commented on modeling, recalling how students mirrored their professor's use of hand gestures during ethical decision-making exercises

during practice: “That’s something we all took from her being in class.” These reflections suggest that in-person learning environments allow for social learning through imitation, as students internalize both verbal and nonverbal behaviors modeled by trusted instructors. Such modeling not only aids in content mastery but also reinforces professional behaviors relevant to applied disciplines like human services.

Traditional formats also allowed for performance-based faculty feedback. P6 described one-on-one activities in human service counseling courses. They recounted, “We’ll be able to do one-on-one activities, like counseling practices.” This form of experiential learning enabled professors to assess practical competencies and offer real-time feedback and adjustments. These interactions helped students refine their interpersonal skills, practice complex techniques, and build confidence in their professional identity. Unlike written comments or asynchronous communication, face-to-face feedback in these settings offered immediacy, clarity, and emotional nuance that supported growth in real-world skills. Across these reflections, participants showed that in-person instruction fostered deeper connections by allowing the students to observe, interact, and receive feedback in ways that shaped both academic understanding and professional behavior.

Theme 2 examined how students engaged interpersonally in online and traditional learning environments, specifically focusing on peer and faculty interactions. Participants highlighted notable contrasts in the nature and depth of engagement across modalities. Online platforms provided structured but often surface-level opportunities for connection, shaped by technological tools and course design. In contrast, traditional formats enabled

spontaneous, embodied, and often emotionally resonant forms of interaction, fostering deeper academic collaboration and social belonging. These interpersonal dimensions of engagement influenced students' sense of community, access to support, and overall satisfaction in their learning environments.

Online learning facilitated interaction primarily through structured activities such as discussion boards, virtual meetings, and occasional synchronous chats. While some participants appreciated these tools for enabling communication across distance and schedules, others noted that such interactions were often minimal or driven by course requirements. Similarly, students described online faculty as flexible and responsive, with many appreciating scheduled check-ins and feedback via text or multimedia formats. However, in-person learning offered more dynamic peer relationships through group projects, study cohorts, and informal support networks, as well as more immediate and embodied access to faculty. Students valued being able to observe their professors' behaviors, model professional skills, and receive real-time feedback, particularly in skill-based courses. These findings suggest that while online environments may provide logistical convenience, traditional settings often foster stronger relational engagement critical to professional identity formation and sustained learning.

Theme 3: Constraints on Engagement Across Learning Environments Occur in Both

Students described how both online and traditional learning environments presented significant obstacles to effective engagement. While online formats offered flexibility, they were often marked by isolation, limited interaction, and difficulties in

accessing real-time support. In contrast, traditional classrooms promoted in-person interaction but frequently conflicted with students' professional, familial, or logistical needs. This theme explores the situational and structural barriers within each modality that complicate learning, communication, and relationship-building.

Theme 3A: Disconnection and Self-Direction in Online Courses

Participants described a wide range of challenges encountered in online learning environments, many of which hindered their ability to engage meaningfully with peers, professors, and course content. Online programs offered flexibility and convenience, but they also introduced new forms of disconnection, ambiguity, and isolation. Students noted difficulties in forming relationships, obtaining timely feedback, managing their schedules, and developing professional skills that involve interacting with people. This subtheme highlights how online learning, although accessible, may fall short in fostering the social and instructional presence necessary to support human services students in their academic and professional development.

A central issue raised by participants was the lack of meaningful peer engagement. Many students described feeling disconnected from classmates and unsure of how or whether to initiate interaction. P1 admitted, "You don't know how people are going to respond. You don't know if they're going to message you back. It makes you a little afraid to reach out." This uncertainty created a sense of social hesitation, which inhibited the kind of academic rapport typically developed in physical classrooms. Similarly, P3 recalled that peer interaction was minimal and impersonal. They recounted, "Mostly it's email. It's not engaging." P3 further emphasized the anonymity of online

classes, stating, “You don't even know who else is in the class with you,” and admitted, “I've never engaged with any of my online peers. It was only strictly me and the teacher.” These accounts collectively reveal a virtual environment where social presence is weak, resulting in students feeling isolated in their learning. P6 reinforced this concern by stating, “They do their work to pass the class, but they’re MIA. That's been my experience.” P10 echoed the difficulty of forging bonds when “we're all in different places,” underscoring the spatial barriers that limit social cohesion in digital formats. This absence of physical and emotional proximity diminishes the likelihood of spontaneous interactions, shared accountability, or the development of a learning community. Without visual or relational cues, students may feel detached from their peers and instructors, contributing to a sense of academic solitude. These challenges are further compounded by the asynchronous nature of many online courses, which restricts real-time dialogue and mutual presence.

Several participants described how the asynchronous structure of online courses amplified the sense of isolation and fragmented communication. P4 noted that most classmates were working professionals juggling jobs and family responsibilities, which limited their availability for interaction. They explained:

> Engagement doesn't happen as much online, and part of that is because we're all working professionals. We all have jobs and families, as we don't have the time necessarily after class, and we don't have synchronous learning. We're basically asynchronous.

This reality diminished opportunities for informal connection and made collaboration more burdensome. P1 echoed this experience, explaining, “You don't know how people are going to respond. You don't know if they're going to message you back. You don't even know if they're paying attention to their messages.” Without shared class time or reliable communication, students struggled to establish peer rapport and felt hesitant to initiate contact. Moreover, the reliance on written discussion boards and emails removed opportunities for spontaneous engagement, which often catalyzed collaborative learning in face-to-face settings. These structural limitations in design and format made it more challenging to build the kinds of academic communities that support motivation, collaboration, and persistence.

Many participants also shared concerns about limited engagement with professors. The absence of in-person interaction often created barriers to relationship-building and instructional support. P1 described the difficulty of arranging one-on-one meetings while juggling parenting, employment, and coursework, noting, “It can be hard to set up individual meetings with the professors.” [Analysis]. Several students described the communication as primarily student-initiated, with little outreach from faculty. For example, P3 reported, “There is no teacher engagement unless you engage the teacher,” adding that after the initial welcome video or syllabus, communication was minimal. The lack of ongoing, proactive faculty presence often left students to navigate course content on their own. P4 shared a particularly frustrating experience with dissertation supervision, recounting, “I had one semester where I got feedback once for the entire course,” despite repeatedly reaching out. P6 and P5 similarly lamented the lack of

personal connection with professors. P6 explained, “With the professor, you don't build too much of a relationship because it's over the computer. It's limited to email. You might email them, and then they have 24 to 48 hours to respond. So that was different.” These delays and barriers made it difficult for students to feel supported, particularly in moments of academic uncertainty or personal stress.

Participants also noted that professors often did not provide direct instruction in online formats. P4 stated plainly, “They're not teaching the material. You're teaching yourself.” This statement reflects a broader perception that faculty in online environments often take a hands-off approach, providing resources without actively guiding students through the learning process. P4’s experiences were echoed by P11, who remarked, “It's not always interactive with that professor,” and added that online instruction often consisted of reading posted notes rather than engaging lectures. Without real-time explanations, students were left to interpret complex concepts on their own, often without clarity or feedback. The lack of guided instruction contributed to feelings of frustration and educational distance. P7 observed that learning person-facing skills such as empathy, tone management, and interpretive listening was difficult online, particularly for those in counseling fields. The participant explained, “A lot of things we do rely on not just the verbal and what’s said, but also the undertones and the environment.” P7, therefore, stressed how the relational dimension of their training was diminished in asynchronous digital spaces. Collectively, these experiences reveal how the absence of instructional presence in online learning can compromise both academic clarity and the development of professional competencies.

Online communication was frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted, complicating peer and faculty relationships. P1 explained that without voice or visual cues, “anything can be misconstrued.” This highlights how the absence of facial expressions, tone, and immediate feedback often led to ambiguity in online exchanges, making it difficult for students to assess intent or emotion. P4 offered a similar concern, stating, “Sometimes people are exceptionally sensitive. They will perceive something that’s not intended.” This underscores the heightened emotional risk students felt when communicating through text alone, especially when feedback or peer comments could be misread. P8 described how tone could be misread or responses taken as insults, even when meant to be supportive, saying, “People will write stuff they might not say in person.” These dynamics often increased conflict or confusion and reduced students’ willingness to participate. Similarly, P11 concluded, “When writing, sometimes you can misunderstand or misinterpret that person.” The limitations of text-based communication posed a significant challenge in disciplines like human services, where emotional intelligence, nuance, and clarity are essential. Asynchronous online formats, while flexible, often fall short in supporting the interpersonal subtleties required for meaningful engagement, particularly in fields that rely heavily on empathy and relational skills.

Other challenges related to the online format included distractions at home, time zone mismatches, and delayed feedback. P3 commented on the difficulty of maintaining focus: “When you're at home, there are distractions, even if you set aside a time.” This reflects the blurred boundaries between home and academic life that many online learners face, where competing responsibilities such as childcare, household duties, and work

obligations can interrupt concentration and reduce the quality of learning. P10 described how balancing coursework with caregiving responsibilities compromised their ability to concentrate, emphasizing that even when family members understood the importance of study time, “they still need things from you.” Several participants also mentioned time zone differences, particularly in group work or synchronous sessions, as a barrier to effective coordination. P4 explained, “Online, you have to think about, ‘Well, I'm Pacific Time, and one is in Pennsylvania, another is in Florida, another in Texas, and some people are in other countries. Trying to get the timing together, it doesn't always work.’” These logistical complications made collaboration more difficult and reduced opportunities for meaningful peer interaction. Such structural barriers were further compounded by a lack of clarity in grading and assignment feedback, as students often had to wait for written comments, which could arrive too late to be useful or lacked sufficient detail for improvement.

Many students felt that online grading lacked clarity and opportunities for dialogue. P6 explained that professors relied heavily on rubrics, and meaningful feedback was rare unless students initiated a follow-up: “When you're getting your test, documents, and papers graded. They go off the rubric and they send it back to you, and you go back and forth with the professor, unless you schedule some time to understand what they're saying.” This quote illustrates the transactional nature of online feedback, where communication is often limited to rubric-based scoring unless students actively pursue clarification, something not all feel empowered or equipped to do. P8 and P10 added that delays in receiving responses could impact their ability to revise work or prepare for

assessments. For example, P8 shared, “Say I misunderstood the question instead of getting hit in the bull's eye, it went a little sideways. I won’t find out about that till I go back in, and then maybe I’ve got to rewrite the whole thing.” The lag between submission and feedback left students feeling uncertain about their academic standing and less able to make timely adjustments. The lack of real-time discussion about assignments and grading undermined students’ confidence and limited their capacity for academic growth.

Theme 3B: Challenges and Constraints in Traditional Learning

While many participants praised the benefits of face-to-face instruction, several acknowledged significant logistical and interpersonal challenges unique to traditional classroom settings. Chief among these were issues related to time management**,** rigid scheduling**,** resource limitations, and social dynamics, including judgment and implicit bias. These accounts offer insight into the structural and relational barriers that may affect student success in in-person learning environments, particularly for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities.

Participants frequently described time-related challenges as a major barrier to traditional learning. P2 summarized the dilemma, stating, “I would just say time management as well as limited time,” suggesting that rigid schedules made in-person participation less feasible. P3 elaborated on the difficulty of attending classes while managing family and work obligations: “The only challenge with in-person would be if you have a family sometimes, or if you have, you know, trying to get there after work.” This tension between professional, parental, and academic roles was echoed by P4, who

shared, “In person, I had to work my life around school. When my kids were all little, they all had to go to daycare so I could go to class, and that was money.” The financial and logistical burden of childcare added another layer of complexity. These reflections illustrate how traditional learning environments can disproportionately strain students with caregiving or full-time work responsibilities, making access to education more challenging for nontraditional learners. The fixed scheduling of in-person classes created logistical stress and reduced students’ autonomy in managing their learning.

In addition to general time constraints, participants described how the structure of in-person classes intensified the challenge of balancing academic and personal responsibilities. P4 explained that in-person attendance consumes more time overall: “Classes take twice as long if you're going in person. With work-life balance and working around their families, there’s not always a way that we can do it.” These reflections highlight how traditional education, despite its benefits, can impose significant logistical costs on students, particularly working adults and caregivers, by requiring them to adhere to institutional schedules. P5 captured this limitation clearly: “One of the cons of in-person courses is that you are on a limited time with that course, you don’t get to decide when the best time is for you.” This lack of flexibility often forced students to adapt their personal and professional lives around rigid class schedules, intensifying the burden on those with caregiving duties, demanding jobs, or other external commitments. Beyond scheduling concerns, several participants also discussed the rigid structure, visibility, and limited resources of traditional classrooms as additional challenges to student well-being and academic success.

In-person learning was also described as less flexible in terms of pacing and assessment timing. P5 pointed out the strict submission expectations, noting, “It’s different in class. So, if you had to go to a class every day, you have to turn in your work during that class.” This inflexibility contrasts with asynchronous online environments, where students often have greater control over when and how they submit their work. Moreover, the social visibility of in-person classrooms created additional pressures. P5 explained:

> In-person courses can make your peers feel a certain way because in online courses, your peers really can’t see how well you’re doing, but they can see it in in-person classes. Being able to see it can affect how you are treated.

The public nature of in-person performance led some students to feel scrutinized or judged by others based on their academic standing, introducing another layer of stress.

Resource availability was another concern. P5 emphasized that in-person learners are sometimes constrained by the physical limitations of their educational setting. The participant said, “You are limited to whatever resources are available to that area, that school, wherever it is. You don’t have a lot of extras that you can get immediately online.” In contrast to online formats that provide expansive digital libraries and tools, traditional classrooms often restrict access to supplementary materials, making it more challenging for students to customize their learning experience or seek immediate support. These limitations can hinder academic flexibility and access to learning aids, particularly for students who rely on varied or on-demand resources to reinforce their understanding.

Summary of Theme 3: Challenges of Learning Online and In-Person

Theme 3 examined the various challenges students encountered in both online and traditional learning environments. Participants offered candid reflections on how each format introduced specific barriers to academic engagement, relationship-building, and overall learning effectiveness. While online learning was associated with isolation, communication breakdowns, and difficulties with motivation and time management, traditional learning presented challenges related to rigid scheduling, resource limitations, and social discomfort. These findings reveal that while both formats offer distinct advantages, they also demand trade-offs that affect students' ability to thrive.

Students frequently described the online learning environment as isolating and impersonal. Many reported minimal peer interaction and limited access to professors, which hindered their sense of community and support. Asynchronous structures further contributed to disengagement, particularly for working professionals who balance multiple roles. Miscommunication was a recurring theme; without facial expressions or tone, students struggled to accurately interpret messages. The participants also identified issues such as lack of motivation, procrastination, and difficulty developing interpersonal skills. Compounding these concerns were structural barriers such as time zone mismatches, delayed feedback, and limited instructional presence, leaving students to navigate course content independently and often without clarity.

While traditional classrooms supported engagement and connection, participants highlighted the significant time-related constraints they imposed. Many students, especially those with families or full-time jobs, struggled to fit rigid class schedules into

their daily lives. The participants also cited the rigidity of traditional formats, which offered little flexibility for when and how students could complete coursework. Some noted that in-person settings exposed students' academic performance to peers, which could contribute to judgment or discomfort. The physical setting occasionally limited resource access, and students identified social pressures, such as implicit bias or group dynamics, as barriers for introverted or marginalized learners.

Theme 4: There are Complementary Strengths of Online and Traditional Learning

Theme 4 highlights the distinct benefits students associated with both online and traditional learning environments. While much of the earlier analysis focused on challenges and constraints, this theme emphasizes the adaptive advantages that each modality offered to graduate-level human services students. Participants consistently described how online learning fostered flexibility, self-discipline, and technological growth, while traditional learning supported interpersonal connection, structure, and skill development through real-time interaction. These dual perspectives reveal that rather than one format being superior, each provides unique value depending on learners' needs, responsibilities, and professional goals.

Theme 4A: Flexibility and Personal Growth in Online Learning

The participants highlighted a range of benefits associated with online learning, particularly its flexibility, promotion of self-discipline, and potential to support diverse learners. While earlier themes emphasized the limitations of digital instruction, this theme focuses on how participants found value in asynchronous structures and self-guided learning. Their reflections underscore the ways online education accommodates

varied life responsibilities, reduces social pressure, and cultivates essential academic and professional skills.

A dominant benefit described by participants was the flexibility to manage coursework around personal and professional obligations. Several students explained how asynchronous learning allowed them to study at their convenience. For example, P2 said, "With everyday life, I can multitask a little better while attending classes online. Going to the classroom took away from my time and other duties I could have done." P2's experience highlight how online learning reduces the conflict between academic responsibilities and daily life, particularly for students balancing multiple roles. P3 echoed this sentiment, noting, "You're at home and can set your own time. You just do it at your leisure." This reflection highlights how online formats enable students to tailor their learning schedules, fostering autonomy and alleviating time-related stress. P4 offered a detailed account of how she adapted her coursework to her shifting work schedules: "I could do it in the middle of the night...on the weekends...it worked around my life." P4's example demonstrates the adaptability of online education, which accommodates non-traditional schedules and enables learning to occur at any time that is most convenient. These responses demonstrate how online formats enable adult learners to pursue their education without compromising their responsibilities at home or work.

This flexibility was especially beneficial for students who are geographically mobile. P8 emphasized the ability to remain enrolled while relocating across states, explaining, "When I started, I lived in Mississippi. Now, I live in Florida. You can be anywhere and still make your classes." Others appreciated the lack of a fixed classroom

schedule. P5 explained, “The benefits of online and in-person learning are learning, but online gives you the freedom to do it on your own time within parameters.” Collectively, these insights reflect how digital platforms provide logistical advantages, enabling students to balance coursework with family, employment, and other obligations without being constrained by time or place.

Beyond flexibility, many participants described how online learning fostered independence, personal responsibility, and intrinsic motivation. P2 reflected, “You develop more responsibility and are self-motivated. You’re able to stay on task and complete your assignments without someone having to remind you.” This response suggests that the structure of online courses cultivates self-regulation, encouraging students to take ownership of their learning process. P3 reinforced this point, noting that online learning requires learners to “have the discipline to just sit down and work on whatever it is you're supposed to be working on every day.” This illustrates how success in virtual environments depends on internal drive and routine-setting, rather than external accountability. P6 added that while the experience was less personal, it was “more independent,” prompting students to manage their learning without direct oversight. This independence, while challenging for some, emerged as a valuable skill for others who appreciated the opportunity to grow in autonomy. Together, these narratives highlight how the asynchronous and self-paced nature of online education can help adult learners build habits of self-discipline that extend beyond the classroom.

Some students noted that the anonymity and distance of online courses fostered a greater sense of comfort, particularly around issues of identity and bias. P5 remarked,

"Online makes it easier to apply skills because there's a sense of being anonymous. Much of that natural bias is removed." By eliminating face-to-face contact, online learning allowed students to focus on their academic contributions without concern for social impressions or judgment. P5 further explained that digital learning helped reduce "the added pressure of worrying about how you will be judged or looked at," suggesting that learners could express themselves more freely without fear of stereotyping or interpersonal bias. Removal of visual and contextual cues could be particularly empowering for students who may feel marginalized or anxious in traditional environments. While anonymity can sometimes create detachment, as described in earlier themes, participants here framed it as an advantage, creating psychological safety and focusing attention on ideas rather than appearances or personalities.

Several participants reported that online learning enhanced their written communication and technological fluency. P7 said, "It helped my written skills. We have to do a lot of typing and responses via writing. So it did help me to think out everything." The repetitive practice of composing posts, responses, and formal assignments helped sharpen grammar, articulation, and clarity of thought. The participants' experiences indicate that students learned to write with precision and professionalism, aware that their posts represented their thinking and could not be revised once submitted.

[Opening sentence]. P10 described how online learning developed their technological capabilities: "What the online courses did for me was they taught me to develop a proficiency with technology. I tried to learn everything I could with the tech tricks so that I could do the same thing." Exposure to digital platforms for discussion,

presentations, or file-sharing enabled students to gain confidence in navigating online tools. This skill set is increasingly essential in both academic and professional contexts, where remote communication, digital literacy, and presentation tools are prevalent.

Theme 4B: Structure, Connection, and Accountability in Traditional Learning

One key advantage of in-person instruction was the heightened motivation it instilled in students. The need to be physically present and publicly accountable encouraged participants to come prepared and stay on top of their responsibilities. P2 explained, "You're going to want to be extra prepared because you don't want to seem unorganized or not knowledgeable on that topic." P2's experiences highlight how visibility in the classroom heightened students' desire to perform well and avoid embarrassment, fostering a proactive approach to preparation. Similarly, P3 reflected, "In-person gives you purpose. It kind of puts more responsibility on you because you have to be prepared for class." Their comment reinforces how physical attendance cultivated a stronger sense of obligation and structure compared to online learning.

The visibility of participation and expectations in a shared space elevated students' standards and reduced tendencies toward procrastination. As P8 stated, "You can't procrastinate as much when you're doing in-person classes. You have to show up in the classroom, and they're going to expect you to have things ready." These reflections suggest that the real-time, face-to-face nature of traditional learning can drive higher levels of commitment, discipline, and preparedness. In addition to fostering accountability, participants also reported that in-person instruction promoted deeper social and academic engagement.

In addition to motivation, participants highlighted that in-person learning fostered more effective engagement with instructors and classmates. P3 emphasized that face-to-face learning promotes interaction, especially in cohort-based formats: “You are sitting in a class, answering questions, engaging with your discussions, and getting more knowledge with your peers.” This reflection highlights how in-person settings foster spontaneous verbal exchanges that facilitate immediate feedback and active participation. P3’s statements were supported by P5, who explained, “Engagement seems to be more effective to me in brick-and-mortar schools because you’re able to actually communicate with people.” The physical presence of peers and instructors made conversations more natural, dynamic, and frequent, contributing to deeper learning. As P5 summarized, “You get to see your instructor, and you get to be more interactive with your peers.” These insights reflect how the embodied nature of in-person learning can strengthen both academic understanding and social connection. The benefits of these interactions extended beyond classroom conversation into modeling, community-building, and interpersonal development.

Participants also described how the classroom environment provided opportunities to observe, model, and physically engage with professional behaviors. P3 stated, “You can mimic what [peers] are doing and apply some of the concepts at work,” suggesting that observing how others approached assignments and interactions deepened their own understanding. This opportunity to witness peer and instructor behavior in real time reinforced key competencies; many participants believed this skill is valuable in human services, which relies on interpersonal skills and social dynamics. The ability to

apply concepts through modeled behavior contributed not only to academic comprehension but also to students' growth as practitioners. In addition, hands-on learning emerged as a core strength of traditional formats. P9 explained, "It gives me a better opportunity to be hands-on with the learning… seeing things written down, further examples, or explaining them." For students who rely on visual cues, physical materials, or immediate instructor input, in-person classes offer enhanced clarity and more personalized instruction than online settings typically provide.

For many students, traditional classes also offered the chance to form long-lasting relationships and a sense of belonging. P3 reflected, "Being a part of the in-person group helps you establish long-term relationships… it allows you to build that rapport and to build a family of friends." This statement illustrates how physical proximity and shared academic experiences helped students develop bonds that extended beyond the classroom. P5 agreed, stating simply, "In-person classes give you a sense of community." The conciseness of this comment underscores how powerful and tangible that community felt to students, even without elaborate explanation. These relationships served not only academic purposes but also emotional and social ones, creating networks of encouragement and accountability that often outlasted the duration of the class itself. This environment, in turn, helped students build and refine their interpersonal skills through authentic, face-to-face interactions.

Another benefit emphasized by participants was the development of interpersonal and group interaction skills. P5 explained, "There are benefits to natural grouping; it gives you a better understanding of people. It allows you to learn how to interact with

different personalities in authentic, natural settings." [Analysis]. This social learning was further reinforced by structured scheduling and classroom rituals. P6 shared, "In-person is more structured for both the professor and the students. It really helped develop your interpersonal skills." The routine and predictability of in-person formats provided comfort and direction for those who thrive under structure. P6 echoed these thoughts, saying, "If you're a structured person, [in-person] could be a benefit." Thus, the participants' reflections portray traditional classrooms as spaces of accountability, interpersonal richness, and embodied learning. The structure, social presence, and shared expectations inherent to in-person education created a learning environment that promoted responsibility and nurtured personal and professional growth.

Summary of Theme 4

Theme 4 explored the distinct advantages students associated with online and traditional learning environments. Participants identified key benefits tied to the structure, flexibility, and relational features of each format. Online learning was frequently described as a flexible, self-paced modality that supported learners' autonomy and allowed them to balance education with other life demands. In contrast, traditional classrooms were praised for fostering motivation, engagement, hands-on learning, and interpersonal development. These differences reflect how each modality supports different student needs, preferences, and skill development.

In online learning environments**,** flexibility was repeatedly highlighted as a dominant benefit. Participants appreciated being able to complete coursework around their work schedules, family obligations, and personal preferences. Flexibility made

education more accessible for nontraditional students, balancing multiple roles. Several participants also emphasized how online formats cultivated discipline and self-motivation**,** requiring students to take initiative, manage their time, and meet deadlines without direct oversight. Additional benefits included the reduced social pressure some felt in online settings, where anonymity and physical distance mitigated bias and increased comfort with participation. Participants also reported that online learning improved writing skills and technological proficiency, primarily through regular typing-based assignments and the use of digital platforms for communication and presentations.

In traditional classroom settings, students described enhanced motivation and accountability resulting from the need to show up prepared and engage actively in a shared physical space. The participants felt that engagement with instructors and peers was more dynamic in face-to-face environments. Physical proximity facilitated immediate questions, organic discussions, and richer interpersonal interactions. These settings also enabled modeling of professional behaviors, as students could observe how professors and peers applied key concepts and skills in real-time. Additionally, many students appreciated the opportunity to build long-term relationships and form a sense of community in traditional settings, which in turn supported their emotional and academic well-being. Finally, participants shared that in-person classes helped them develop interpersonal and group communication skills**,** particularly by navigating diverse personalities and practicing hands-on tasks in structured, collaborative environments.

Together, the participants' accounts demonstrate that online learning excels in flexibility, independence, and digital skill-building**.** In contrast, traditional classrooms

offer a more interactive, relational, and immersive learning experience**.** Each format supports student success in distinct ways, reinforcing the importance of aligning course delivery with learner needs and goals.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings of this qualitative study, which examined how graduate-level human services students described their educational experiences in both online and traditional learning environments. Using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, I developed four major themes that reflected how students engaged with course content, peers, and instructors across modalities. Subthemes supported each theme to capture specific aspects of student learning, motivation, and social interaction. These findings were drawn from interviews with twelve participants, all of whom had completed both online and traditional graduate-level courses in human services. Participant quotations were used to ground the themes in lived experience and highlight the diversity of perspectives.

Theme 1 explored how online and traditional learning involve different forms of engagement, capturing students' descriptions of how they cognitively interacted with material in different modalities. In Theme 1A, the participants described how online courses promote individual engagement with the material, reflecting how students used asynchronous tools like discussion boards, instructor feedback, and assigned readings to engage in self-directed learning. These methods emphasized autonomy, flexibility, and personal reflection. In contrast, in Theme 1B, the participants discussed how traditional courses promote collaborative engagement with material, illustrated how in-person

settings encouraged spontaneous discussion, real-time clarification, and peer-to-peer dialogue. The participants noted that classroom structure supported engagement through debate, hands-on practice, and active modeling from professors and peers.

Theme 2 explored relational engagement in academic environments, focusing on how students interacted with peers and instructors in both online and traditional settings. Theme 2A explored peer engagement and social support across learning environments, highlighting that online students often encountered limited peer connection due to asynchronous schedules, lack of visual presence, and minimal shared time. Conversely, traditional students reported building strong study groups, long-term friendships, and emotional support systems through routine face-to-face contact. Theme 2B explored instructor accessibility and instructional presence, revealing that online learners appreciated scheduling flexibility and feedback responsiveness from faculty, while traditional learners valued the immediacy of real-time access to instructors and the ability to observe their teaching behaviors.

Theme 3 examined constraints on engagement across learning environments, describing structural and personal barriers that limited student connection or performance. Theme 3A explored disconnection and self-direction in online courses, focusing on feelings of isolation, delayed feedback, time zone misalignment, and frequent misinterpretations in communication. These challenges required students to develop independence and high levels of personal discipline to persist. Theme 3B explored constraints in traditional learning, captured how students, particularly those with caregiving or professional obligations, struggled with rigid class schedules, commuting

demands, classroom exposure, and implicit bias. These burdens often interfered with participation, comfort, and academic focus in face-to-face settings.

Theme 4 addressed complementary strengths of online and traditional formats, emphasizing the unique advantages each mode offered to students. Theme 4A explored flexibility and personal growth in online learning, reflecting how participants benefited from learning on their own schedules, which allowed them to manage other responsibilities while developing skills in independence, self-discipline, writing, and technology. Many students also felt more comfortable in the relative anonymity of online environments. Theme 4B explored the structure, connection, and accountability in traditional learning, described how classroom structure supported accountability, motivation, interpersonal skill development, and long-term professional. Students described traditional learning as more relational, immediate, and immersive in preparing them for human services work.

The findings offer a comprehensive understanding of how graduate human services students perceive their learning experiences across modalities. The findings show that while online and traditional learning each present challenges, they also offer unique affordances that shape student engagement in different but complementary ways. Chapter 5 will interpret these findings through the lens of social learning theory, integrate them with existing literature, and explore practical implications for educational leaders, faculty, and future researchers.

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Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended both traditional and online courses describe their educational experiences, particularly in relation to classroom engagement, peer and faculty interaction, and the application of knowledge. This study was conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how learning modality affects the development of academic and interpersonal skills essential for human services professionals. Guided by social learning theory and grounded in Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, the study sought to capture students' authentic perspectives through rich, narrative data. The findings offer insight into how educational formats shape engagement, support systems, and learning outcomes for graduate students in this field.

Four themes were identified from the analysis of the participants' interviews. In Theme 1, participants described how online and traditional courses foster different forms of engagement; online learning promoted individual, self-directed engagement, while traditional learning encouraged collaborative, socially embedded interaction. In Theme 2, relational dynamics with peers and instructors varied by modality, with traditional settings offering richer face-to-face engagement and online courses affording flexibility but limited visibility. In Theme 3, participants identified distinct challenges that constrain engagement across both environments, including time limitations, communication barriers, and structural rigidity. In Theme 4, the participating graduate students reflected on the complementary strengths of each format: online learning supports autonomy and

convenience, whereas traditional learning builds community, accountability, and interpersonal competence. Together, these insights highlight how modality-specific features influence the educational experiences of human services students and point toward the need for responsive, inclusive, and relationally aware instructional design.

In Chapter 5, I presents an interpretation of the findings, organized by the four major themes developed through thematic analysis. Each theme is examined in light of the research questions and the study's conceptual framework, social learning theory. I also discuss the study's limitations, implications for social change, and recommendations for practice and future research. Together, these sections frame the significance of the findings and their relevance to graduate education in human services.

Interpretation of the Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how graduate-level human services students describe their educational experiences in both online and traditional learning environments, with a particular focus on engagement, knowledge application, and social connection. In this section, I interpret the thematic findings presented in Chapter 4 through the lens of Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory, drawing connections between the data and existing literature. By examining how students navigate different learning modalities, the interpretation highlights the cognitive, relational, and structural factors that shape student engagement. The following discussion is organized by four major themes and their corresponding subthemes, highlighting how each contributes to a deeper understanding of the learning experiences of graduate students in human services education.

Discussion and Interpretation of Theme 1 Findings

Theme 1 revealed distinct patterns of engagement in online and traditional learning environments. Participants in online courses described their learning as primarily individual, relying on asynchronous tools such as discussion boards, written feedback, and posted resources. This engagement style emphasized self-regulation, cognitive independence, and reflective processing. Conversely, participants in traditional settings emphasized collaborative engagement through group discussions, live interaction, and verbal exchanges with instructors. These differences align with findings from Bao (2020), who noted that online learners often develop metacognitive engagement strategies, while traditional learners rely more on social and participatory cues. The contrast highlights the differing affordances of each modality and underscores the adaptability required of students navigating varied learning environments.

Each mode of learning offered unique benefits that aligned with the demands and preferences of different learners. Participants in online environments reported enhanced autonomy, flexibility, and individualized pacing. They learned by observing peer contributions, reflecting on interpretations, and navigating content independently, benefits consistent with studies on self-paced digital learning (Martin et al., 2020). Traditional learning environments, on the other hand, supported real-time engagement, emotional connection, and the development of interpersonal skills. Participants emphasized opportunities for spontaneous dialogue, collaborative problem solving, and mutual feedback, which are learning dynamics supported by research into classroom-based active learning (Baber, 2021). Together, these findings suggest that online

environments foster independence and cognitive focus, while traditional settings cultivate community and real-time interaction, both of which are valuable for preparing students in human services fields.

Students who engaged individually with online content developed critical academic habits that contribute to long-term academic and professional success. Independent engagement encourages students to internalize information, strengthen personal accountability, and build cognitive persistence. As participants described, analyzing peers' posts and instructor feedback provided opportunities to reflect deeply before forming responses, leading to more deliberate and informed academic participation. Research by Zheng et al. (2021) supports this notion, suggesting that asynchronous learning environments promote analytical thinking and academic self-efficacy. In human services, independent decision making and reflection are essential skills. Consequently, these cognitive skills learned in online settings lay a strong foundation for ethical reasoning and client-centered practice.

Conversely, collaborative engagement in traditional settings enabled students to cultivate interpersonal and communication skills through immediate and frequent interaction. Participants gained clarity through peer questions, developed empathy by hearing others' perspectives, and strengthened their ability to work in groups, which are also skills essential to effective human services practice. Laal and Ghodsi (2012) noted that cooperative learning environments support higher achievement, social support, and mutual accountability. The sense of community that emerged in traditional classrooms enhanced students' sense of belonging and motivation. For future practitioners in the

human services field, these experiences provide a simulation of real-world teamwork, where collaboration, responsiveness, and relationship-building are essential to success.

From the perspective of Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory, the findings demonstrate how both learning environments activate key mechanisms of learning through observation and modeling. Online learners engaged in vicarious learning by observing peer responses and instructor feedback, modeling behaviors, and internalizing academic expectations. This form of observational learning, even without direct interaction, supports the acquisition of knowledge and skills through reflective processing (Schunk & Usher, 2012). Although the learning was not interactive in real-time, the participants consistently described observing others' thinking processes and using those insights to guide their own performance. This reflective observational learning supported self-efficacy, as learners could adjust their behaviors in response to modeled success.

Contrasting online settings, traditional classroom engagement activated all four core processes of social learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Students attended to instructor and peer behavior, retained modeled strategies, reproduced them during live interaction, and received reinforcement through verbal feedback, body language, and peer approval. Zimmerman (2000) and Bandura (1997) have argued that immediate feedback and social interaction enhance the development of self-regulatory skills and motivation. The participants described receiving instructional support and emotional affirmation, creating a learning environment where academic risk-taking was safe and encouraged. In this setting, students developed technical competence

and confidence, which are essential traits for human services professionals who must communicate, adapt, and lead in complex social environments.

Discussion and Interpretation of Theme 2 Findings

Theme 2 examined how peer and faculty relationships influenced student engagement in both online and traditional learning environments. The participants consistently described the social dimensions of learning as essential to their academic development, personal growth, and persistence. In online settings, peer engagement was described as structured but limited, often constrained by the asynchronous format, geographic dispersion, and students' competing responsibilities. While some participants (e.g., P1, P4, P6) appreciated the formalized use of discussion boards, many felt isolated, with little opportunity to build emotional rapport. In contrast, students in traditional settings (e.g., P3, P5, P10) described bonding through shared experiences, informal conversations, and mutual support, which fostered academic motivation and emotional connection.

Instructors also played a central role in shaping students' relational engagement. Online learners valued the flexibility of scheduling support sessions, responsive communication, and varied formats of feedback. These accommodations helped students manage competing demands and develop personalized learning relationships with faculty. However, participants noted that online faculty presence often relied on student initiation and asynchronous formats, which limited the development of rapport. By contrast, students in traditional environments emphasized spontaneous access to professors, real-time clarification of concepts, and the benefit of embodied presence, such as modeling

professionalism and emotional tone. These observations align with studies that have highlighted the importance of immediacy and presence in instructor-student engagement, as confirmed by empirical literature (Dixson, 2015; Martin et al., 2020).

Relational engagement, whether among peers or with faculty, is especially important in human services education, where students must develop strong interpersonal skills, empathy, and collaboration. Participants in traditional classrooms described learning these skills through observation, shared practice, and informal peer modeling. These findings align with Laal and Ghodsi's (2012) work on the value of cooperative learning environments, which foster mutual accountability, emotional support, and real-time knowledge construction. The sense of community in face-to-face classrooms not only increased engagement but also prepared students for the collaborative nature of human services professions.

Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory provides a valuable lens to interpret these findings. Online learners engaged in vicarious learning through written peer contributions, instructor feedback, and self-paced observation of academic modeling. This form of cognitive apprenticeship enabled internalization of behaviors and expectations, even in the absence of real-time interaction. However, traditional learners benefited from all four core processes of social learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. Participants described observing instructors' behaviors, practicing modeled techniques in real time, and receiving immediate verbal or non-verbal reinforcement. These conditions fostered self-efficacy and professional readiness by integrating cognitive, behavioral, and emotional engagement within relational contexts.

Together, the findings in Theme 2 reinforce the idea that relational dynamics differ significantly across modalities but are critically important in both. While online platforms allow for convenience and personalization, traditional classrooms provide richer opportunities for modeling, feedback, and emotional bonding, which are elements that are vital in preparing students for the interpersonal demands of human services work. These differing strengths highlight how each modality cultivates distinct types of relationships that contribute to student learning. Understanding these relational dynamics is essential for designing educational experiences that foster both academic and professional growth.

Discussion and Interpretation of Theme 3 Findings

Theme 3 focused on the constraints that limit student engagement across online and traditional learning environments. The participants described how each modality introduced specific structural and personal barriers that impacted their learning experiences. In online environments, common issues include feelings of isolation, difficulty forming meaningful relationships, and delayed communication with peers and instructors. In contrast, students in traditional classrooms often struggled with time constraints, transportation logistics, and the rigid structure of scheduled meetings. Both learning environments required students to develop coping strategies to maintain academic involvement and progress.

In online learning settings, students often expressed a sense of disconnection due to the lack of spontaneous interaction and limited opportunities for real-time communication. Participants, including P1, P3, and P6, noted that asynchronous formats

made it difficult to build rapport or clarify misunderstandings quickly. This disconnection extended to both peer and faculty interactions, where communication was mostly student-initiated and written, leading to frequent misinterpretation of tone and meaning. These experiences reflect findings by Dixson (2015), who highlighted that the absence of immediate feedback and nonverbal cues in virtual classrooms can erode the social presence necessary for engagement. For human services students, whose professional roles demand high levels of empathy, interpretation, and interpersonal clarity, these limitations can hinder the development of essential relational competencies.

Compounding the challenges in online learning were factors such as time zone differences, family obligations, and the lack of instructor presence. P3 and P10 reported struggling to align group project timelines or access live sessions due to scheduling conflicts, while others, like P4, expressed frustration with limited faculty outreach and guidance. These challenges mirror research from Lowenthal et al. (2020), who found that online students often experience a heightened need for instructional support due to the self-directed nature of virtual learning. Without consistent faculty interaction and proactive engagement, students may struggle to feel supported or connected to the course material, increasing the risk of disengagement and attrition. This is particularly problematic in human services education because mentorship and modeling are critical for skill development.

Students in traditional classroom environments described constraints related to logistics, time, and visibility. P2 and P4 detailed the stress of balancing caregiving responsibilities and commuting to campus, while P5 noted the impact of being visibly

assessed by peers and professors. Implicit bias, social dynamics, and classroom exposure were also cited as challenges that affected participation and comfort in traditional learning spaces. These accounts align with studies by Ladson-Billings (2014), which emphasize how physical classroom settings can reinforce social hierarchies and contribute to unequal learning experiences. For students who identify as introverted or marginalized, the pressure to perform or conform in face-to-face settings may limit authentic engagement and learning.

Despite these constraints, participants in both modalities demonstrated resilience and adaptability. Many online learners developed strong time management and self-motivation skills, as described by P2 and P6, while students in traditional classrooms found ways to advocate for support or coordinate around demanding schedules. These findings highlight the importance of institutional flexibility and responsive teaching strategies that accommodate students' varied needs. As Ke and Kwak (2013) have shown, scaffolding support systems and designing learner-centered environments can significantly reduce engagement barriers and improve academic outcomes. For educators in human services programs, this means balancing structure with personalization to support students facing diverse constraints.

From the perspective of social learning theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977), the constraints described by participants highlight conditions that can either inhibit or facilitate the core mechanisms of learning: attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. In online environments, the absence of social cues and feedback can interrupt the attention and motivation phases of learning, while in traditional settings, time

pressures and implicit biases can reduce students' ability to retain and reproduce modeled behaviors. These findings suggest that educators must actively mitigate structural barriers and foster relational and instructional presence to maintain engagement across modalities. By doing so, they can create learning environments that support observational learning, skill application, and long-term professional readiness, regardless of the format.

Discussion and Interpretation of Theme 4 Findings

Theme 4 explored the complementary strengths of online and traditional learning environments, emphasizing how each format supports student development in unique and sometimes contrasting ways. The theme explored flexibility and personal growth in online learning, and structure, connection, and accountability in traditional learning. Participants consistently reported that the learning environment shaped how they engaged with material and people, and how they developed important academic habits, professional skills, and personal confidence. These findings reflect the broader goal of human services education: preparing students to operate effectively in complex, interpersonal, and often unpredictable social environments.

Theme 4A revealed that the flexibility of online learning allowed participants to manage their coursework around family, employment, and other responsibilities. Some participants described completing assignments at night, during breaks, or while traveling, highlighting the value of asynchronous learning for nontraditional students. This flexibility fostered autonomy, time management, and self-discipline, traits that participants believed were critical for both academic and professional success. The structure of online coursework, with its deadlines but lack of fixed meeting times,

prompted students to become proactive learners, a finding supported by Martin et al. (2020), who argued that flexible digital learning environments support increased ownership over learning and time management skills.

In addition to flexibility, participants associated online learning with the development of internal motivation and technological fluency. Several described how the independent nature of the format encouraged them to stay on task without external prompting. For instance, P2 emphasized the need for "self-motivation and discipline," while P6 noted that online learning was more independent and required greater personal responsibility. This aligns with the findings of Zheng et al. (2021), who discovered that online learners tend to develop stronger metacognitive regulation skills. Technological proficiency also emerged as a benefit, particularly for students like P10, who described learning new tools and presentation platforms by observing their peers and replicating their methods. This provides an example of vicarious learning, as described in Bandura and Walters' (1977) social learning theory.

Theme 4B described how traditional learning environments offered structure, predictability, and interpersonal accountability that helped students stay engaged and prepared. Multiple participants explained that having to attend class and participate face-to-face increased their motivation and reduced procrastination. For example, P3 stated that in-person classes gave them purpose; such responses highlight how embodied presence, peer visibility, and real-time expectations fostered a more externally regulated, but socially reinforced, form of academic responsibility. This dynamic aligns with

research by Baber (2021), who found that students in traditional classrooms benefit from consistent instructor presence and live accountability.

Another strength of traditional classrooms was the opportunity to form relationships and receive feedback in real time. Participants, such as P3 and P5, described a strong sense of community and long-term peer relationships that developed from shared classroom experiences. Others emphasized how modeling, hands-on learning, and spontaneous interaction with faculty enhanced their skill development and professional identity. For instance, P9 discussed the importance of hands-on demonstrations for mastering practical techniques, while P5 noted the ability to "see and communicate" directly with both peers and instructors. These benefits reflect Bandura's (1997) idea that direct modeling and social reinforcement are essential for behavioral learning and self-efficacy in social domains.

The findings in Theme 4 illustrate how online and traditional environments can be seen as complementary rather than opposing. Online learning fosters autonomy, adaptability, and digital competence, while conventional learning cultivates interpersonal fluency, accountability, and a sense of professional presence. Each format supports different aspects of social learning. In online environments, learners internalize peer examples and apply knowledge through independent engagement; in traditional environments, learners observe, practice, and receive direct reinforcement from others. Both environments provide critical developmental opportunities, especially in a field like human services where practitioners must balance independence with collaboration, and flexibility with structure.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations emerged during the execution of the study that may affect the interpretation and transferability of the findings. As anticipated in Chapter 1, the small, purposefully selected sample limits the generalizability of the results. While the sample size was sufficient for qualitative thematic analysis and data saturation was achieved, the findings reflect the experiences of only 12 graduate human services students and may not capture the full diversity of perspectives present in broader populations. As such, the transferability of results to students in other disciplines or institutional contexts may be constrained.

A second limitation relates to the interview instrument, which was developed specifically for this study and had not undergone formal reliability or validity testing. Although the questions were guided by the research purpose and aligned with the study's theoretical framework, it is possible that key aspects of participants' experiences were not fully elicited or explored. This may have limited the comprehensiveness of the data and affected the depth of certain themes. Future research may benefit from refining and testing the instrument in other studies to ensure consistency and clarity.

Interpretive bias also remained a potential limitation, as the primary investigator conducted all interviews, transcribed the data, and led the analysis. Although reflexive journaling, memo writing, and member checking were used to mitigate bias and enhance credibility, the thematic interpretation was still shaped by the researcher's perspectives and assumptions. In particular, my skepticism about the effectiveness of online learning required ongoing self-awareness and critical reflection to ensure participant voices were

prioritized during analysis. These efforts helped reduce subjective influence on the process of data collection and analysis.

Logistical limitations affected participant diversity. Although variation existed in age, work background, and geographic location, the sample primarily included individuals who had access to stable internet connections and the time and resources to complete an hour-long interview. This may have excluded the perspectives of students experiencing more acute structural or technological barriers. In future studies, incorporating additional outreach strategies or alternate formats (e.g., focus groups or asynchronous responses) may help address this limitation and increase inclusivity

Recommendations

This section presents recommendations grounded in the three key themes that emerged from the data analysis. Each recommendation is aligned with participants' reflections on their experiences with graduate-level human services education in both traditional and online modalities. The goal of these recommendations is to inform instructional practices, course design, and institutional policies that support engagement, relational learning, and equitable access across diverse learning environments.

Recommendations Based on Theme 1

Theme 1 focused on students' cognitive engagement across online and traditional learning environments. Participants reported that online formats encouraged independent thinking, while traditional classrooms fostered collaborative learning. Each modality presented unique strengths and limitations related to student engagement. The following

recommendations aim to enhance cognitive participation by leveraging the distinct affordances of each setting.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen Peer and Instructor Visibility in Online Settings

In Theme 1, the participants described how online learning supports individual engagement primarily through reflection, observation, and self-directed exploration. Course designers should intentionally create structures that make peer thinking more visible and instructor presence more felt. The participants described benefiting from carefully reading peer responses and learning through instructor feedback, yet several noted that they often felt isolated or responsible for self-teaching. To combat this potentially harmful experience, online environments should incorporate structured asynchronous peer-to-peer engagement**,** such as required discussion post analysis, rotating peer feedback, or interactive annotation tools. Instructors should provide personalized video or audio feedback and initiate regular check-ins to signal attentiveness and care. Embedding brief instructional videos that model cognitive strategies, alongside clear rubrics and exemplars, can further guide independent learners while reducing ambiguity. These enhancements can transform solitary engagement into socially enriched, cognitively stimulating experiences that preserve online flexibility while nurturing social learning processes.

Recommendation 2: Expand Collaborative Skill-Building in Traditional Classrooms

The findings from Theme 1 also revealed that traditional classroom settings excel at cultivating collaborative engagement, emotional connection, and interpersonal learning. Students valued face-to-face discussions, peer feedback, and spontaneous

instructional interactions, which fostered community and mutual accountability. Course designers and instructors in traditional settings should expand on these strengths by incorporating structured group projects**,** role-based learning**,** and rotating leadership activities that simulate professional teamwork. Opportunities for students to co-lead discussions, mentor peers, or engage in cross-disciplinary exchanges can enhance ownership and social cognition (Laal & Ghodsi, 2012). Additionally, instructors should create space for reflective dialogue and encourage meta-communication about group dynamics, ensuring that all voices are represented and included. These approaches help students refine key human services competencies, such as responsiveness and cooperative problem-solving, within the supportive, interactive context of in-person learning.

Recommendations Based on Theme 2

Theme 2 explored relational engagement in academic environments, specifically how students connect with peers and instructors in both online and traditional learning settings. The participants emphasized that while online environments allow for flexible communication, they often limit spontaneous social connection and relational modeling. In contrast, traditional formats promoted stronger bonds, visibility, and immediate access to instructional support. The recommendations below are designed to help institutions enhance relational engagement across both modalities.

Recommendation 3: Integrate Social Presence Protocols into Online Courses

In Themes 2A and 2B, the participants consistently described online learning as convenient yet socially disconnected, especially in asynchronous settings. To mitigate these barriers, faculty should implement structured social presence protocols that

prioritize relationship-building from the outset. These may include weekly peer connection prompts, mandatory small-group discussions with rotating members, and icebreaker video introductions to humanize the cohort. Additionally, instructors can increase their presence by posting weekly update videos, offering virtual office hours with cameras on, and replying publicly to a selection of discussion board posts to model interpersonal engagement. These strategies help reduce feelings of isolation, promote peer familiarity, and establish a sense of belonging, which is vital for success in relationally focused fields like human services.

Recommendation 4: Support Instructor Relational Training Across Modalities

Participants across both subthemes emphasized the importance of faculty demonstrating warmth, accessibility, and responsiveness, which are essential components of effective relational pedagogy. Institutions should offer faculty development programs focused on relational teaching practices, emphasizing the unique demands of digital and face-to-face environments. In online contexts, this might include training on providing multimodal feedback and utilizing synchronous tools to check in with students individually. In traditional environments, training might focus on modeling professional behaviors, cultivating emotional safety, and providing opportunities for informal student-instructor interactions before or after class. Such professional learning can enhance instructors' ability to serve as relational models, thereby enriching students' social learning experiences across settings.

Recommendations Based on Findings in Theme 3

Theme 3 addressed the constraints on student engagement across learning environments. Participants described how both modalities introduced barriers that interfered with their ability to connect, learn, and stay motivated. In online formats, students struggled with delayed feedback, disjointed communication, and isolation. In traditional settings, logistical barriers such as commuting, caregiving responsibilities, and rigid schedules often compromised learning access. The following recommendations aim to reduce these systemic constraints and foster more equitable engagement opportunities across modalities.

Recommendation 5: Enhance Communication and Responsiveness in Online Learning

Several participants in Theme 3A described frustration with a lack of feedback, inconsistent faculty presence, and frequent miscommunications. To improve instructional support, programs should establish communication benchmarks, such as guaranteed response windows (e.g., within 24–48 hours), instructor presence dashboards, and recurring touchpoints built into the course design. Faculty should use consistent feedback tools—such as screen-capture commentary, audio replies, or personalized check-ins—to clarify expectations and reinforce connection. Institutions might also deploy peer-support frameworks such as learning pods or accountability pairs to ensure students have regular interaction, even when instructor response is delayed. These strategies help students feel less isolated and more supported in navigating online academic demands.

Recommendation 6: Increase Flexibility and Support for Traditional Learners

In Theme 3B, participants noted that the rigidity of traditional classes posed challenges for students balancing jobs, caregiving, and long commutes. Institutions should consider offering hybrid or "flex" class formats where students can attend synchronously in-person or online, depending on weekly obligations. Additionally, providing campus childcare services, evening/weekend scheduling options, and asynchronous supplements can make traditional programs more accessible. Faculty can also build greater flexibility into attendance and participation policies to accommodate life demands without penalizing students. These approaches align educational access with the complex realities many adult learners face, promoting greater equity and persistence in traditional learning pathways.

Recommendations Based on Findings in Theme 4

Theme 4 focused on the complementary strengths of online and traditional learning formats. Participants described how online environments foster flexibility, independence, and personal growth, while traditional formats support interpersonal development, accountability, and structure. These dual benefits suggest that neither modality alone fully meets the complex needs of graduate human services students. To maximize the strengths of both, educational institutions should pursue integrative design strategies that combine the flexibility of online learning with the interpersonal richness of face-to-face interaction.

Recommendation 7: Develop Hybrid Course Models That Blend Flexibility with Structured Social Engagement

Based on the findings in Theme 4, programs should consider adopting hybrid learning models that preserve the self-paced autonomy of online learning while embedding key relational and structured components from traditional classrooms. For example, online courses might include monthly in-person workshops, synchronous virtual discussions, or team-based simulation projects that replicate the interpersonal intensity of on-campus learning. These structures should be designed intentionally to promote skill modeling, peer collaboration, and real-time feedback, all of which participants identified as strengths of in-person education. At the same time, asynchronous content delivery should remain available to support adult learners who value flexibility, allowing students to access lectures and complete assignments on their own schedules. This blended approach aligns with social learning theory by supporting both observational learning and active participation, creating a more balanced and holistic educational experience for graduate students in human services.

Implications

This study has the potential to generate positive social change at the individual, organizational, and policy levels by informing the design and delivery of graduate-level human services programs. At the individual level, the findings underscore the importance of designing learning environments that cater to diverse learner needs, including flexibility, self-direction, and opportunities for interpersonal development. By implementing course structures that balance autonomy with community, programs can

help students develop both the cognitive skills and interpersonal competencies essential to effective human services practice. At the organizational level, institutions may use these insights to revise faculty training and course development guidelines to better align with how students experience learning in each modality. This can lead to more equitable, engaging, and accessible learning experiences for adult students from diverse backgrounds. At the societal or policy level, the study may inform broader discussions around online education standards, especially in licensure-track human services programs, by identifying how engagement, social learning, and instructional presence can be supported across modalities.

Theoretically, the study provides a strong example of Bandura and Walter's (1977) social learning theory by illustrating how modeling, observation, and interaction are expressed differently across learning environments. The findings suggest that observational learning occurs not only through real-time interaction, as traditionally emphasized in social learning theory, but also through asynchronous mechanisms such as reading peer posts or analyzing written feedback. This expands the application of social learning theory to digital contexts, particularly in adult education and graduate-level coursework. The study also reinforces the idea that learning is both cognitive and social, and that modalities influence which aspects are emphasized.

Empirically, the study reinforces existing literature suggesting that modality shapes engagement. However, the study also provides original insights into how students adapt and compensate for environmental constraints. For example, the development of self-discipline in online courses or the sense of exposure in traditional classrooms were

commonly described, offering grounded data to support broader theories of adult learning, motivation, and instructional design. These insights may inform future mixed-methods or longitudinal studies that further quantify the effects of different engagement types on academic outcomes and professional readiness.

Practically, this study offers several actionable insights for faculty, instructional designers, and academic leaders. Programs should integrate structured opportunities for peer interaction in online courses, such as rotating discussion facilitation roles or peer-review assignments, while also increasing faculty presence through timely, personalized feedback. Traditional classroom settings should continue to foster interpersonal and collaborative learning, but with added flexibility or hybrid options to accommodate adult learners balancing complex responsibilities. Faculty development programs should include training on social learning strategies that are modality-specific, helping educators create more engaging and equitable learning experiences across formats. Ultimately, aligning instructional strategies with how students naturally engage across environments can promote deeper learning and professional growth in human services education.

Conclusion

This study explored how graduate-level human services students experience engagement, interaction, and knowledge application across online and traditional learning environments. Through rich qualitative analysis, the findings demonstrated that each modality cultivates different forms of engagement: online learning supports cognitive independence, flexibility, and self-discipline, while traditional classroom settings foster collaborative dialogue, emotional connection, and interpersonal development. These

complementary strengths underscore that effective human services education does not reside in the superiority of one mode over the other but in how each setting activates distinct learning processes aligned with student needs, goals, and life circumstances.

By examining the experiences of students who navigate both formats, this study adds depth to the existing literature on adult learning, educational design, and engagement in higher education. The insights gained from the participants point to a critical need for human services programs to remain learner-centered, adaptable, and intentionally designed to promote both academic mastery and relational competencies. Additionally, the application of social learning theory helped contextualize how students engage through observation, modeling, and interaction, regardless of the modality, further emphasizing the importance of structuring opportunities for students to observe, reflect on, and practice critical skills.

The study contributes to positive social change by informing faculty, administrators, and curriculum designers about how to create equitable, accessible, and engaging learning experiences that prepare graduates for the relational, ethical, and reflective demands of human services work. As educators strive to meet the needs of a diverse and digitally connected student body, this study offers a timely reminder that engagement is not tied to format but to the quality of interaction, intentionality of design, and recognition of students as active co-constructors of knowledge. These findings invite continued dialogue on how best to integrate flexibility with structure, independence with connection, and theory with practice in the evolving landscape of higher education.

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Appendix A: Participant Screening Questions

1. Are you currently enrolled in a human services graduate program in the United States? [Yes/No]
2. Are you at least 18 years old? [Yes/No]
3. Have you completed at least one graduate-level human services course in person? [Yes/No]
4. Have you completed at least one graduate-level human services course online? [Yes/No]

Participants must answer yes to all questions to qualify for the study.

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Flyer

Appendix C: Interview Questions and Alignment

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to explore how graduate-level human services students who have attended graduate-level courses, both traditional and online learning, describe their educational experiences, especially concerning engagement in the classroom, knowledge application, and connections with peers.

Purpose components: Classroom engagement (CE), Knowledge application (KA), Connection with Peers (CP)

No	Question	Purpose component	Social learning component
1	How do you actively observing others to learn and engage with the material in your **online** classes?	CE	Observational learning
2	How do you actively observe others to learn and engage with material in your **in-person** classes?	CE	Observational learning
3	Can you give an example of a behavior or technique modeled by an instructor or peer in an **in-person or online course** that you adopted yourself?	CE	Modeling
4	In which environment—traditional or online—do you feel that effective modeling of engagement by instructors is more evident? Why?	CE	Modeling
5	How do interactions with peers and instructors in your **in-person** courses affect your engagement and learning?	CE, CP	Social interaction
6	How do interactions with peers and instructors in your **online** courses affect your engagement and learning?	CE, CP	Social interaction
7	What motivates you to engage in classroom activities in both **in-person and online** learning environments?	CE	Motivation
8	How does the feedback from instructors and peers in **in-person and online** courses influence your engagement and willingness to participate?	CE, CP	Feedback and reinforcement
9	How does observing others perform tasks or solve problems in your **online course** influence your own ability to apply similar knowledge or skills?	KA	Observational learning
10	How does observing others perform tasks or solve problems in your **in-person course** influence your own ability to apply similar knowledge or skills?	KA	Observational learning
11	In which learning environment—**in-person or online**—do you find it easier to imitate professional practices or techniques demonstrated by your instructors, and why?	KA	Modeling
12	How do interactions with peers influence your ability to apply course concepts in practical settings? Does this differ between **traditional and online courses?**	KA, CP	Social interaction
13	Is there a difference in how motivated you feel to apply learned knowledge in **in-person vs. online** settings? *Prompting Q: Can you explain any specific experiences that shaped this feeling?*	KA	Motivation

14	Can you provide an example of how constructive criticism from an instructor or peer in the **in-person environment** helped you improve your application of knowledge?	KA, CP	Feedback and reinforcement
15	Can you provide an example of how constructive criticism from an instructor or peer in the **online environment** helped you improve your application of knowledge?	KA, CP	Feedback and reinforcement
16	How does seeing your peers succeed or struggle in certain tasks in your **online classes** affect your motivation and learning strategies?	CP	Observational learning
17	How does seeing your peers succeed or struggle in certain tasks in your **in-person classes** affect your motivation and learning strategies?	CP	Observational learning
18	In your experience, how does the sense of community or the feeling of being part of a group differ between **in-person and online** courses?	CP	Social interaction
19	What are the main challenges you face when interacting with peers in online classes compared to traditional ones? How do you overcome these challenges?	CP	Social interaction
20	What are the benefits of online learning and in-person learning?	N/A	N/A
21	What are the challenges of online learning and in-person learning?	N/A	N/A
22	After discussing your experiences with in-person and online courses, which type of learning environment do you like best and why?	N/A	N/A

Appendix D: Organization of Primary and Secondary Codes into Categories

Category 1A: Online Learning Engagement. *This category encompasses how students actively participate with course materials and content in virtual environments.*

Secondary Code 1.1: Peer Response Learning. This code captures learning that occurs through reading, analyzing, and responding to classmates' work and perspectives.

1. Reading peer responses - P1, P2, P4, P5, P9, P11
2. Learning from different perspectives - P1, P4, P5, P9
3. Waiting to see others' work - P4
4. Observing problem-solving approaches - P5

Secondary Code 1.2: Instructor Feedback Systems. This code represents structured feedback mechanisms that instructors use to guide and assess student learning online.

5. Receiving instructor feedback - P2, P6
6. Feedback helps assessment preparation - P2
7. Instructor facilitated engagement - P2

Secondary Code 1.3: Self-Directed Learning. This code describes independent learning behaviors where students take primary responsibility for their education.

8. Self-directed learning - P3, P4
9. Independent research - P3, P4

Secondary Code 1.4: Digital Resource Engagement. This code encompasses active use of online materials, resources, and references provided in virtual courses.

10. Reading assigned materials - P5, P10, P12
11. Watching provided videos - P5, P10, P12
12. Accessing linked resources - P5
13. Building reference libraries - P5

Secondary Code 1.5: Virtual Collaboration. This code represents coordinated learning activities that occur through digital platforms and tools.

14. Virtual study groups - P6, P7
15. Group chat coordination - P7

Secondary Code 1.6: Non-Engagement Patterns. This code identifies behaviors indicating minimal or absent participation in online learning activities.

16. Non-engagement choice - P8
17. Focus on individual completion - P8

Category 1B: In-Person Learning Engagement. *This category describes how students actively participate with course materials and content in traditional classroom environments.*

Secondary Code 1.7: Sensory Learning Approaches. This code captures learning strategies that utilize multiple senses and physical interaction with materials.

18. Audio-visual learning preference - P1
19. Hands-on learning opportunities - P1

Secondary Code 1.8: Real-Time Interaction. This code represents immediate, synchronous communication between students, peers, and instructors.

20. Direct peer interaction - P2, P3, P7, P8, P10, P11, P12
21. Face-to-face communication - P2, P7, P11
22. Real-time professor engagement - P2, P3, P5, P6, P7
23. Immediate question asking - P2, P6, P8

Secondary Code 1.9: Observational Learning. This code describes learning that occurs through watching and modeling others' behaviors and perspectives.

24. Learning from diverse perspectives - P2, P3, P4
25. Observing instructor behavior - P2, P5, P7, P12
26. Modeling professional skills - P2, P5, P7, P12

Secondary Code 1.10: Group Learning Activities. This code encompasses structured group interactions and collaborative learning experiences in classroom settings.

27. Group discussion participation - P3, P11
28. Cohort formation - P3

Secondary Code 1.11: Practical Skill Development. This code represents hands-on learning experiences that develop specific professional or academic skills.

29. Skill practice opportunities - P3, P4, P6, P10, P12
30. External resource exploration - P3
31. Clinical skill development - P4, P6, P10, P12
32. Body language awareness - P10
33. Public speaking practice - P10

Category 2A: Online Peer Engagement. *This category describes how students interact and connect with classmates in virtual learning environments.*

Secondary Code 2.1: Structured Online Interaction. This code captures formal requirements for peer engagement in online courses.

34. Required peer responses - P1, P4
35. Forced engagement minimum - P4

Secondary Code 2.2: Virtual Meeting Coordination. This code represents organized online meetings and synchronous collaboration between peers.

36. Virtual class meetings - P2, P12
37. Zoom collaboration - P2

Secondary Code 2.3: Digital Communication Platforms. This code encompasses the use of online platforms for peer-to-peer communication and interaction.

38. Chat room introductions - P4
39. Discussion board interaction - P4

Secondary Code 2.4: Experience Sharing. This code describes the exchange of personal and professional experiences between online peers.

40. Learning from backgrounds - P4
41. Professional experience sharing - P4

Category 2B: In-Person Peer Engagement. *This category encompasses how students interact and connect with classmates in traditional classroom settings.*

Secondary Code 2.5: Collaborative Projects. This code captures group work and collaborative activities that occur outside of regular class time.

42. Group project collaboration - P1, P2, P4, P9
43. Meeting outside class - P1, P2, P4

Secondary Code 2.6: Participation Patterns. This code describes varying levels of student participation in classroom discussions and activities.

44. Limited class participation - P1, P4, P9

Secondary Code 2.7: Study Communities. This code represents informal learning groups and academic support networks formed by students.

45. Study group formation - P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P8, P10, P11, P12
46. Cohort establishment - P3, P4

Secondary Code 2.8: Social Support Systems. This code encompasses emotional and academic support networks developed between classmates.

47. Mutual support systems - P3, P5, P10
48. Social connections - P3, P4, P8
49. Peer assistance - P4, P8, P11

Secondary Code 2.9: Relationship Building. This code describes the development of personal and professional relationships between students.

50. Relationship building - P3, P5, P7, P10
51. Encouraging environment - P3, P5, P10
52. Natural grouping - P5, P6

Category 2C: Online Professor Engagement. *This category describes how students interact with instructors in virtual learning environments.*

Secondary Code 2.10: Virtual Access Systems. This code captures the flexible ways students can access instructors in online courses.

53. Flexible scheduling - P1, P2
54. Virtual office hours - P1, P2

Secondary Code 2.11: Digital Feedback Methods. This code represents various electronic methods instructors use to provide feedback to students.

55. Feedback provision - P2, P4
56. Midweek check-ins - P2
57. Assessment preparation - P2

Secondary Code 2.12: Multimedia Instruction. This code encompasses the use of various digital media for instruction and feedback delivery.

58. Multimedia feedback - P4, P2
59. Video comments - P4
60. Screen sharing instruction - P4, P7

Category 2D: In-Person Professor Engagement

This category encompasses how students interact with instructors in traditional classroom settings.

Secondary Code 2.13: Physical Access Opportunities

This code captures face-to-face interaction opportunities between students and professors.

61. Office hour visits - P2, P6, P9, P10, P12
62. After-class conversations - P2, P6
63. Immediate questioning - P6, P8

Secondary Code 2.14: Behavioral Observation. This code describes learning that occurs through observing instructor behavior and professional modeling.

64. Reading professor cues - P2
65. Observing professional behavior - P2, P5, P7, P12
66. Skill modeling - P2, P5, P7, P12

Secondary Code 2.15: Personal Connection. This code represents the development of individual relationships between students and instructors.

67. Personal connection - P10
68. Body language observation - P10
69. Individual attention - P2, P10
70. Skill feedback - P6

Category 3A: Online Learning Challenges. This category identifies difficulties and obstacles students encounter in virtual learning environments.

Secondary Code 3.1: Peer Interaction Limitations. This code captures barriers to meaningful peer connection and collaboration in online settings.

71. Limited peer interaction - P1, P3, P4, P5, P6, P10
72. Peer availability uncertainty - P1
73. Email-only communication - P3
74. No class awareness - P3

Secondary Code 3.2: Geographic and Time Barriers. . This code describes logistical challenges related to location and scheduling in online education.

75. Professional time constraints - P4
76. Geographic dispersion - P4, P10
77. Time zone coordination - P4

Secondary Code 3.3: Professor Interaction Challenges. This code encompasses difficulties in accessing and communicating with instructors online.

78. Limited professor interaction - P1, P3, P5, P12
79. Delayed feedback - P4, P6, P8, P10

Secondary Code 3.4: Self-Teaching Burden. This code describes the increased responsibility students face for managing their own learning online.

80. Self-teaching burden - P4, P11

Secondary Code 3.5: Communication Misunderstandings. This code captures problems arising from text-based and asynchronous communication methods.

81. Communication misinterpretation - P2, P4, P5, P8, P11
82. Text-based misunderstanding - P4, P5, P8, P11

Secondary Code 3.6: Environmental Distractions. This code describes external factors that interfere with online learning focus and concentration.

83. Home distractions - P3, P5, P10, P11

Secondary Code 3.7: Self-Management Challenges. This code encompasses difficulties students face in managing their own learning process and motivation.

84. Time management challenges - P5, P10
85. Self-motivation requirements - P6, P8, P11
86. Procrastination tendencies - P8, P11

Secondary Code 3.8: Skill Application Limitations. This code describes constraints on practicing and applying learned skills in virtual environments.

87. Skill application limitations - P7

Category 3B: In-Person Learning Challenges. *This category identifies difficulties and obstacles students encounter in traditional classroom environments.*

Secondary Code 3.9: Schedule and Time Constraints. This code captures the inflexibilities and logistical challenges of attending physical classes.

88. Time constraints - P2, P3, P4, P5
89. Schedule inflexibility - P4, P5
90. Childcare coordination - P4
91. Work-life balance - P4

Secondary Code 3.10: Rigid Learning Structure. This code describes limitations imposed by fixed classroom schedules and traditional teaching methods.

92. Rigid scheduling - P5, P12

Secondary Code 3.11: Social Pressure and Judgment. This code encompasses anxiety and concerns related to public performance and peer evaluation.

93. Public performance pressure - P5
94. Peer judgment concerns - P5, P8

Secondary Code 3.12: Resource and Bias Limitations. This code describes systemic barriers and inequities present in traditional classroom settings.

95. Limited resources - P5
96. Implicit bias exposure - P5, P8
97. Introvert challenges - P5

Category 4A: Online Learning Benefits. This category identifies advantages and positive aspects of virtual learning environments.

Secondary Code 4.1: Flexibility and Independence. This code captures the freedom and autonomy that online learning provides to students.

98. Schedule flexibility - P2, P3, P4, P5, P8
99. Location independence - P8

Secondary Code 4.2: Self-Regulation Development. This code describes personal growth and skill development that occurs through online learning.

100. Self-discipline development - P2, P3, P6
101. Self-motivation building - P2

Secondary Code 4.3: Personalized Learning Pace. This code encompasses the ability for students to control their learning speed and rhythm.

102. Pace control - P5, P6

Secondary Code 4.4: Reduced Social Pressure. This code describes the relief from social anxiety and judgment that online environments can provide.

103. Reduced judgment - P5
104. Anonymous comfort - P5

Secondary Code 4.5: Learning Style Accommodation. This code captures how online formats can better serve diverse learning preferences and needs.

105. Independent learning - P6, P12

Secondary Code 4.6: Skill Development. This code describes specific competencies that students develop through online learning experiences.

106. Writing skill improvement - P7, P12
107. Technology proficiency - P10

Category 4B: In-Person Learning Benefits. *This category identifies advantages and positive aspects of traditional classroom environments.*

Secondary Code 4.7: Motivation and Preparation. This code captures how physical attendance and presence enhance student engagement and readiness.

108. Preparation motivation - P2, P3

Secondary Code 4.8: Enhanced Engagement. This code describes increased participation and involvement that occurs in face-to-face settings.

109. Enhanced engagement - P3, P5, P12

Secondary Code 4.9: Social Learning. This code encompasses the collaborative and community aspects of in-person education.

110. Skill modeling - P3
111. Long-term relationships - P3, P5
112. Community building - P5

Secondary Code 4.10: Interpersonal Development. This code describes the growth of social and communication skills through in-person interaction.

113. Interpersonal skills - P5, P6, P12

Secondary Code 4.11: Structured Learning Environment. This code captures the benefits of external organization and routine provided by traditional classrooms.

114. Structured learning - P6, P8
115. Reduced procrastination - P8

Secondary Code 4.12: Hands-On Learning. This code describes the practical and experiential learning opportunities available in physical settings.

116. Hands-on learning - P9, P12